'MISSING'

MRS. HUMPHRY WARD

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'MISSING'

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'MISSING'

BY

MRS. HUMPHRY WARD
Author of "Robert Elsmere," "Lady Rose's Daughter,"
"The Mating of Lydia," etc.

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PART I

'MISSING'

CHAPTER I

'SHALL I set the tea, Miss?'

Miss Cookson turned from the window.

'Yes—bring it up—except the tea of course—they ought to be here at any time.'

'And Mrs. Weston wants to know what time supper's to be?'

The fair-haired girl speaking was clearly north-country. She pronounced the 'u' in 'supper,' as though it were the German 'u' in *Suppe*.

Miss Cookson shrugged her shoulders.

'Well, they'll settle that.'

The tone was sharp and off-hand. And the maid-servant, as she went downstairs, decided for the twentieth time that afternoon, that she didn't like Miss Cookson, and she hoped her sister, Mrs. Sarratt, would be nicer. Miss Cookson had been poking her nose into everything that afternoon, fiddling with the rooms and furniture, and interfering with Mrs. Weston. As if Mrs. Weston didn't know what to order for lodgers, and how to make them comfortable! As if she hadn't had dozens of brides

and bridegrooms to look after before this!—and if she hadn't given them all satisfaction, would they ever have sent her all them picture-postcards which decorated her little parlour downstairs?

All the same, the house-parlourmaid, Milly by name, was a good deal excited about this particular couple who were now expected. For Mrs. Weston had told her it had been a 'war wedding,' and the bridegroom was going off to the front in a week. Milly's own private affairs—in connection with a good-looking fellow, formerly a gardener at Bowness, now recently enlisted in one of the Border regiments—had caused her to take a special interest in the information, and had perhaps led her to put a bunch of monthly roses on Mrs. Sarratt's dressing-table. Miss Cookson hadn't bothered herself about flowers. That she might have done!—instead of fussing over things that didn't concern her—just for the sake of ordering people about.

When the little red-haired maid had left the room, the lady she disliked returned to the window, and stood there absorbed in reflections that were not gay, to judge from the furrowed brow and pinched lips that accompanied them. Bridget Cookson was about thirty; not precisely handsome, but at the same time, not ill-looking. Her eyes were large and striking, and she had masses of dark hair, tightly coiled about her head as though its owner felt it troublesome and in the way. She was thin, but rather largely built, and her movements were quick and decided. Her

tweed dress was fashionably cut, but severely without small ornament of any kind.

She looked out upon a beautiful corner of English Lake-land. The house in which she stood was built on the side of a little river, which, as she saw it, came flashing and sparkling out of a lake beyond, lying in broad strips of light and shade amid green surrounding fells. The sun was slipping low, and would soon have kindled all the lake into a white fire, in which its islands would have almost disappeared. But, for the moment, everything was plain:—the sky, full of light, and filmy grey cloud, the fells with their mingling of wood and purple crag, the shallow reach of the river beyond the garden, with a little family of wild duck floating upon it, and just below her a vivid splash of colour, a mass of rhododendron in bloom, setting its rose-pink challenge against the cool greys and greens of the fell.

But Bridget Cookson was not admiring the view. It was not new to her, and moreover she was not in love with Westmorland at all; and why Nelly should have chosen this particular spot to live in, while George was at the war, she did not understand. She believed there was some sentimental reason. They had first seen him in the Lakes—just before the war—when they two girls and their father were staying actually in this very lodging-house. But sentimental reasons are nothing.

Well, the thing was done. Nelly was married, and in another week, George would be at the front. Per-

haps in a fortnight's time she would be a widow. Such things have happened often. 'And then what shall I do with her?' thought the sister, irritably,—recoiling from a sudden vision of Nelly in sorrow, which seemed to threaten her own life with even greater dislocation than had happened to it already. 'I must have my time to myself!—freedom for what I want'—she thought to herself, impatiently, 'I can't be always looking after her.'

Yet of course the fact remained that there was no one else to look after Nelly. They had been left alone in the world for a good while now. Their father, a Manchester cotton-broker in a small way, had died some six months before this date, leaving more debts than fortune. The two girls had found themselves left with very small means, and had lived, of late, mainly in lodgings—unfurnished rooms—with some of their old furniture and household things round them. Their father, though unsuccessful in business, had been ambitious in an old-fashioned way for his children, and they had been brought up 'as gentlefolks'—that is to say without any trade or profession.

But their poverty had pinched them disagreeably—especially Bridget, in whom it had produced a kind of angry resentment. Their education had not been serious enough, in these days of competition, to enable them to make anything of teaching after their Father's death. Nelly's water-colour drawing, for instance, though it was a passion with her, was quite

untrained, and its results unmarketable. Bridget had taken up one subject after another, and generally in a spirit of antagonism to her surroundings, who, according to her, were always 'interfering' with what she wanted to do,—with her serious and important occupations. But these occupations always ended by coming to nothing; so that, as Bridget was irritably aware, even Nelly had ceased to be as much in awe of them as she had once been.

But the elder sister had more solid cause than this for dissatisfaction with the younger. Nelly had really behaved like a little fool! The one family asset of which a great deal might have been made—should have been made—was Nelly's prettiness. She was *very* pretty—absurdly pretty—and had been a great deal run after in Manchester already. There had been actually two proposals from elderly men with money, who were unaware of the child's engagement, during the past three months; and though these particular suitors were perhaps unattractive, yet a little time and patience, and the right man would have come along, both acceptable in himself, and sufficiently supplied with money to make everything easy for everybody.

But Nelly had just wilfully and stubbornly fallen in love with this young man—and wilfully and stubbornly married him. It was unlike her to be stubborn about anything. But in this there had been no moving her. And now there was nothing before either of them but the same shabbiness and penury as be-

fore. What if George had two hundred and fifty a year of his own, besides his pay?—a fact that Nelly was always triumphantly brandishing in her sister's eyes.

No doubt it was more than most young subalterns had—much more. But what was two hundred and fifty a year? Nelly would want every penny of it for herself—and her child—or children. For of course there would be a child—

Bridget Cookson fell into profound depths of thought, emerging from them, now as often before, with the sore realisation of how much Nelly might have done with her 'one talent,' both for herself and her sister, and had not done.

The sun dropped lower; one side of the lake was now in shadow, and from the green shore beneath the woods and rocks, the reflections of tree and crag and grassy slope were dropping down and down, unearthly clear and far, to that inverted heaven in the 'steady bosom' of the water. A little breeze came wandering, bringing delicious scents of grass and moss, and in the lake the fish were rising.

Miss Cookson moved away from the window. How late they were! She would hardly get home in time for her own supper. They would probably ask her to stay and sup with them. But she did not intend to stay. Honeymooners were much better left to themselves. Nelly would be a dreadfully sentimental bride; and then dreadfully upset when George went away. She had asked her sister to join them in

the Lakes, and it was taken for granted that they would resume living together after George's departure. But Bridget had fixed her own lodgings, for the present, a mile away, and did not mean to see much of her sister till the bridegroom had gone.

There was the sound of a motor-car on the road, which ran along one side of the garden, divided from it by a high wall. It could hardly be they; for they were coming frugally by the coach. But Miss Cookson went across to a side window looking on the road to investigate.

At the foot of the hill opposite stood a luxurious car, waiting evidently for the party which was now descending the hill towards it. Bridget had a clear view of them, herself unseen behind Mrs. Weston's muslin blinds. A girl was in front, with a young man in khaki, a convalescent officer, to judge from his frail look and hollow eyes. The girl was exactly like the fashion-plate in the morning's paper. She wore a very short skirt and Zouave jacket in grey cloth, high-heeled grey boots, with black tips and gaiters, a preposterous little hat perched on one side of a broad white forehead, across which the hair was parted like a boy's, and an ostrich plume on the top of the hat, which nodded and fluttered so extravagantly that the face beneath almost escaped the spectator's notice. Yet it was on the whole a handsome face, audacious, like its owner's costume, and with evident signs—for Bridget Cookson's sharp eyes—of slight make-up.

Miss Cookson knew who she was. She had seen her in the neighbouring town that morning, and had heard much gossip about her. She was Miss Farrell, of Carton Hall, and that gentleman coming down the hill more slowly behind her was no doubt her brother Sir William.

Lame? That of course was the reason why he was not in the army. It was not very conspicuous, but still quite definite. A stiff knee, Miss Cookson supposed—an accident perhaps—some time ago. Lucky for him!—on any reasonable view. Bridget Cookson thought the war 'odious,' and gave no more attention to it than she could help. It had lasted now nearly a year, and she was heartily sick of it. It filled the papers with monotonous news which tired her attention—which she did not really try to understand. Now she supposed she would have to understand it. For George, her new brother-in-law, was sure to talk a terrible amount of shop.

Sir William was very tall certainly, and good-looking. He had a short pointed beard, a ruddy, sunburnt complexion, blue eyes and broad shoulders —the common points of the well-born and landowning Englishman. Bridget looked at him with a mixture of respect and hostility. To be rich was to be so far interesting; still all such persons, belonging to a world of which she knew nothing, were in her eyes 'swells,' and gave themselves airs; a procedure on their part, which would be stopped when the middle and lower classes were powerful enough to put them

in their place. It was said, however, that this particular man was rather a remarkable specimen of his kind—didn't hunt—didn't preserve—had trained as an artist, and even exhibited. The shopwoman in B—— from whom Miss Cookson derived her information about the Farrells, had described Sir William as 'queer'—said everybody knew he was 'queer.' Nobody could get him to do any county work. He hated Committees, and never went near them. It was said he had been in love and the lady had died. 'But if we all turned lazy for that kind of thing!'—said the little shopwoman, shrugging her shoulders. Still the Farrells were not unpopular. Sir William had a pleasant slow way of talking, especially to the small folk; and he had just done something very generous in giving up his house—the whole of his house—somewhere Cockermouth way, to the War Office, as a hospital. As for his sister, she seemed to like driving convalescent officers about, and throwing away money on her clothes. There was no sign of 'war economy' about Miss Farrell.

Here, however, the shopwoman's stream of gossip was arrested by the arrival of a new customer. Bridget was not sorry. She had not been at all interested in the Farrells' idiosyncrasies; and she only watched their preparations for departure now, for lack of something to do. The chauffeur was waiting beside the car, and Miss Farrell got in first, taking the front seat. Then Sir William, who had been loitering on the hill, hurried down to give a

helping hand to the young officer, who was evidently only in the early stages of convalescence. After settling his guest comfortably, he turned to speak to his chauffeur, apparently about their road home, as he took a map out of his pocket.

At this moment, a clatter of horses' hoofs and the rattle of a coach were heard. Round the corner, swung the Windermere evening coach in fine style, and drew up at the door of Mrs. Weston's lodgings, a little ahead of the car.

'There they are!' said Miss Cookson, excited in spite of herself. 'Well, I needn't go down. George will bring in the luggage.'

A young man and a young lady got up from their seats. A ladder was brought for the lady to descend. But just as she was about to step on it, a fidgeting horse in front made a movement, the ladder slipped, and the lady was only just in time to withdraw her foot and save herself.

Sir William Farrell, who had seen the little incident, ran forward, while the man who had been placing the ladder went to the horse, which was capering and trying to rear in his eagerness to be off.

Sir William raised the ladder, and set it firmly against the coach.

'I think you might risk it now,' he said, raising his eyes pleasantly to the young person above him.

'Thank you,' said a shy voice. Mrs. Sarratt turned round and descended. Meanwhile the man holding the ladder saw an officer in khaki standing

on the top of the coach, and heard him address a word of laughing encouragement to the lady. And no sooner had her feet touched the ground than he was at her side in a trice.

'Thank you, Sir!' he said, saluting. 'My wife was very nearly thrown off. That horse has been giving trouble all the way.'

'Must be content with what you can get, in war-time!' said the other smiling, as he raised his hat to the young woman he had befriended, whom he now saw plainly. 'And there are so few visitors at present in these parts that what horses there are don't get enough to do.'

The face turned upon him was so exquisite in line and colour that Sir William, suddenly struck, instead of retreating to his car, lingered while the soldier husband—a lieutenant, to judge from the stripes on his cuff,—collected a rather large amount of luggage from the top of the coach.

'You must have had a lovely drive along Windermere,' said Sir William politely. 'Let me carry that bag for you. You're stopping here?'

'Yes—' said Mrs. Sarratt, distractedly, watching to see that the luggage was all right. 'Oh, George, *do* take care of that parcel!'

'All right.'

But she had spoken too late. As her husband, having handed over two suit cases to Mrs. Weston's fourteen-year old boy, came towards her with a large brown paper parcel, the string of it slipped, Mrs.

Sarratt gave a little cry, and but for her prompt rush to his assistance, its contents would have descended into the road. But through a gap in the paper various tin and china objects were disclosed.

'That's your "cooker," Nelly,' said her husband laughing. 'I told you it would bust the show!'

But her tiny, deft fingers rapidly repaired the damage, and re-tied the string while he assisted her. The coach drove off, and Sir William patiently held the bag. Then she insisted on carrying the parcel herself, and the lieutenant relieved Sir William.

'Awfully obliged to you!' he said gratefully. 'Good evening! We're stopping here for a bit.' He pointed to the open door of the lodging-house, where Mrs. Weston and the boy were grappling with the luggage.

'May I ask—' Sir William's smile as he looked from one to the other expressed that loosening of conventions in which we have all lived since the war —'Are you home on leave, or—'

'I came home to be married,' said the young soldier, flushing slightly, while his eyes crossed those of the young girl beside him. 'I've got a week more.'

'You've been out some time?'

'Since last November. I got a scratch in the Ypres fight in April—oh, nothing—a small flesh wound—but they gave me a month's leave, and my medical board has only just passed me.'

'Lanchesters?' said Sir William, looking at his cap. The other nodded pleasantly.

'Well, I am sure I hope you'll have good weather here,' said Sir William, stepping back, and once more raising his hat to the bride. 'And—if there was anything I could do to help your stay—'

'Oh, thank you, Sir, but—'

The pair smiled again at each other. Sir William understood, and smiled too. A more engaging couple he thought he had never seen. The young man was not exactly handsome, but he had a pair of charming hazel eyes, a good-tempered mouth, and a really fine brow. He was tall too, and well proportioned, and looked the pick of physical fitness. 'Just the kind of splendid stuff we are sending out by the ship-load,' thought the elder man, with a pang of envy—'And the girl's lovely!'

She was at that moment bowing to him, as she followed her husband across the road. A thought occurred to Sir William, and he pursued her.

'I wonder—' he said diffidently—'if you care for boating—if you would like to boat on the lake—'

'Oh, but it isn't allowed!' She turned on him a pair of astonished eyes.

'Not in general. Ah, I see you know these parts already. But I happen to know the owner of the boathouse. Shall I get you leave?'

'Oh, that *would* be delightful!' she said, her face kindling with a child's joyousness. 'That *is* kind of

you! Our name is Sarratt—my husband is Lieutenant Sarratt.'

—'Of the 21st Lanchesters? All right—I'll see to it!'

And he ran back to his car, while the young people disappeared into the little entrance hall of the lodging-house, and the door shut upon them.

Miss Farrell received her brother with gibes. Trust William for finding out a beauty! Who were they?

Farrell handed on his information as the car sped along the Keswick road.

'Going back in a week, is he?' said the convalescent officer beside him. Then, bitterly—'lucky dog!'

Farrell looked at the speaker kindly.

'What—with a wife to leave?'

The boy, for he was little more, shrugged his shoulders. At that moment he knew no passion but the passion for the regiment and his men, to whom he couldn't get back, because his 'beastly constitution' wouldn't let him recover as quickly as other men did. What did women matter?—when the 'push' might be on, any day.

Cicely Farrell continued to chaff her brother, who took it placidly—fortified by a big cigar.

'And if she'd been plain, Willy, you'd never have so much as known she was there! Did you tell her you haunted these parts?'

He shook his head.

Meanwhile the bride and bridegroom had been met on the lodging-house stairs by the bride's sister, who allowed herself to be kissed by the bridegroom, and hugged by the bride. Her lack of effusion, however, made little impression on the newcomers. They were in that state of happiness which transfigures everything round it; they were delighted with the smallest things; with the little lodging-house sitting room, its windows open to the lake and river; with its muslin curtains, very clean and white, its cluster-rose too, just outside the window; with Mrs. Weston, who in her friendly flurry had greeted the bride as 'Miss Nelly,' and was bustling to get the tea; even, indeed, with Bridget Cookson's few casual attentions to them. Mrs. Sarratt thought it 'dear' of Bridget to have come to meet them, and ordered tea for them, and put those delicious roses in her room—

'I didn't!' said Bridget, drily. 'That was Milly. It didn't occur to me.'

The bride looked a little checked. But then the tea came in, a real Westmorland meal, with its toasted bun, its jam, and its 'twist' of new bread; and Nelly Sarratt forgot everything but the pleasure of making her husband eat, of filling his cup for him, of looking sometimes through the window at that shining lake, beside which she and George would soon be roaming—for six long days. Yes, and nights too. For there was a moon rising, which would be

at the full in two or three days. Imagination flew forward, as she leant dreamily back in her chair when the meal was over, her eyes on the landscape. They two alone—on that warm summer lake—drifting in the moonlight—heart against heart, cheek against cheek. A shiver ran through her, which was partly passion, partly a dull fear. But she banished fear. Nothing—*nothing* should spoil their week together.

'Darling!' said her husband, who had been watching her—'You're not very tired?' He slipped his hand round hers, and her fingers rested in his clasp, delighted to feel themselves so small, and his so strong. He had spoken to her in the low voice that was hers alone. She was jealous lest Bridget should have overheard it. But Bridget was at the other end of the room. How foolish it had been of her—just because she was so happy, and wanted to be nice to everybody!—to have asked Bridget to stay with them! She was always doing silly things like that—impulsive things. But now she was married. She must think more. It was really very considerate of Bridget to have got them all out of a difficulty and to have settled herself a mile away from them; though at first it had seemed rather unkind. Now they could see her always sometime in the day, but not so as to interfere. She was afraid Bridget and George would never really get on, though she—Nelly—wanted to forget all the unpleasantness there had been,—to forget everything—everything but

George. The fortnight's honeymoon lay like a haze of sunlight between her and the past.

But Bridget had noticed the voice and the clasped hands,—with irritation. Really, after a fortnight, they might have done with that kind of demonstrativeness. All the same, Nelly was quite extraordinarily pretty—prettier than ever. While the sister was slowly putting on her hat before the only mirror the sitting-room possessed, she was keenly conscious of the two figures near the window, of the man in khaki sitting on the arm of Nelly's chair, holding her hand, and looking down upon her, of Nelly's flushed cheek and bending head. What a baby she looked!—scarcely seventeen. Yet she was really twenty-one—old enough, by a long way, to have done better for herself than this! Oh, George, in himself, was well enough. If he came back from the war, his new-made sister-in-law supposed she would get used to him in time. Bridget however did not find it easy to get on with men, especially young men, of whom she knew very few. For eight or ten years now, she had looked upon them chiefly as awkward and inconvenient facts in women's lives. Before that time, she could remember a few silly feelings on her own part, especially with regard to a young clerk of her father's, who had made love to her up to the very day when he shamefacedly told her that he was already engaged, and would soon be married. That event had been a shock to her, and had made her cautious and suspicious towards men ever since. Her

life was now full of quite other interests—incoherent and changeable, but strong while they lasted. Nelly's state of bliss awoke no answering sympathy in her.

'Well, good-bye, Nelly,' she said, when she had put on her things—advancing towards them, while the lieutenant rose to his feet. 'I expect Mrs. Weston will make you comfortable. I ordered in all the things for to-morrow.'

'Everything's *charming!*' said Nelly, as she put her arms round her sister. 'It was awfully good of you to see to it all. Will you come over to lunch to-morrow? We might take you somewhere.'

'Oh, don't bother about me! You won't want me. I'll look in some time. I've got a lot of work to do.'

Nelly withdrew her arms. George Sarratt surveyed his sister-in-law with curiosity.

'Work?' he repeated, with his pleasant, rather puzzled smile.

'What are you doing now, Bridget?' said Nelly, softly, stroking the sleeve of her sister's jacket, but really conscious only of the man beside her.

'Reading some proof-sheets for a friend,' was the rather short reply, as Bridget released herself.

'Something dreadfully difficult?' laughed Nelly.

'I don't know what you mean by difficult,' said Bridget ungraciously, looking for her gloves. 'It's psychology—that's all. Lucy Fenn's bringing out another volume of essays.'

'It sounds awful!' said George Sarratt, laughing.

'I wish I knew what psychology was about. But can't you take a holiday?—just this week?'

He looked at her rather gravely. But Bridget shook her head, and again said good-bye. George Sarratt took her downstairs, and saw her off on her bicycle. Then he returned smiling, to his wife.

'I say, Bridget makes me feel a dunce! Is she really such a learned party?'

Nelly's dark eyes danced a little. 'I suppose she is—but she doesn't stick to anything. It's always something different. A few months ago, it was geology; and we used to go out for walks with a hammer and a bag. Last year it was *the*-ology! Our poor clergyman, Mr. Richardson, was no match for Bridget at all. She could always bowl him over.'

'Somehow all the "ologies" seem very far away—don't they?' murmured Sarratt, after they had laughed together. They were standing at the window again, his arm close round her, her small dark head pressed against him. There was ecstasy in their nearness to each other—in the silver beauty of the lake—in the soft coming of the June evening; and in that stern fact itself that in one short week, he would have left her, would be facing death or mutilation, day after day, in the trenches on the Ypres salient. While he held her, all sorts of images flitted through his mind—of which he would not have told her for the world—horrible facts of bloody war. In eight months he had seen plenty of them.

The signs of them were graven on his young face, on his eyes, round which a slight permanent frown, as of perplexity, seemed to have settled, and on his mouth which was no longer naif and boyish, but would always drop with repose into a hard compressed line.

Nelly looked up.

'Everything's far away'—she whispered—'but this—and you!' He kissed her upturned lips—and there was silence.

Then a robin singing outside in the evening hush, sent a message to them. Nelly with an effort drew herself away.

'Shan't we go out? We'll tell Mrs. Weston to put supper on the table, and we can come in when we like. But I'll just unpack a little first—in our room.'

She disappeared through a door at the end of the sitting-room. Her last words—softly spoken—produced a kind of shock of joy in Sarratt. He sat motionless, hearing the echo of them, till she reappeared. When she came back, she had taken off her serge travelling dress and was wearing a little gown of some white cotton stuff, with a blue cloak, the evening having turned chilly, and a hat with a blue ribbon. In this garb she was a vision of innocent beauty; wherein refinement and a touch of strangeness combined with the dark brilliance of eyes and hair, with the pale, slightly sunburnt skin, the small features and tiny throat, to rivet the spectator. And

she probably knew it, for she flushed slightly under her husband's eyes.

'Oh, what a paradise!' she said, under her breath, pointing to the scene beyond the window. Then—lifting appealing hands to him—'Take me there!'

CHAPTER II

THE newly-married pair crossed a wooden bridge over the stream from the Lake, and found themselves on its further shore, a shore as untouched and unspoilt now as when Wordsworth knew it, a hundred years ago. The sun had only just vanished out of sight behind the Grasmere fells, and the long Westmorland after-glow would linger for nearly a couple of hours yet. After much rain the skies were clear, and all the omens fair. But the rain had left its laughing message behind; in the full river, in the streams leaping down the fells, in the freshness of every living thing—the new-leafed trees, the grass with its flowers, the rushes spreading their light armies through the flooded margins of the lake, and bending to the light wind, which had just, as though in mischief, blotted out the dream-world in the water, and set it rippling eastwards in one sheet of living silver, broken only by a cloud-shadow at its further end. Fragrance was everywhere—from the trees, the young fern, the grass; and from the shining west, the shadowed fells, the brilliant water, there breathed a voice of triumphant beauty, of unconquered peace, which presently affected George Sarratt strangely.

They had just passed through a little wood; and

in its friendly gloom, he had put his arm round his wife so that they had lingered a little, loth to leave its shelter. But now they had emerged again upon the radiance of the fell-side, and he had found a stone for Nelly to rest on.

'That those places in France, and that sky—should be in the same world!' he said, under his breath, pointing to the glow on the eastern fells, as he threw himself down on the turf beside her.

Her face flushed with exercise and happiness suddenly darkened.

'Don't—don't talk of them to-night!'—she said passionately—'not to-night—just to-night, George!'

And she stooped impetuously to lay her hand on his lips. He kissed the hand, held it, and remained silent, his eyes fixed upon the lake. On that day week he would probably just have rejoined his regiment. It was somewhere in the neighbourhood of Bailleul. Hot work, he heard, was expected. There was still a scandalous shortage of ammunition—and if there was really to be a 'push,' the losses would be appalling. Man after man that he knew had been killed within a week—two or three days—twenty-four hours even!—of rejoining. Supposing that within a fortnight Nelly sat here, looking at this lake, with the War Office telegram in her hand—'Deeply regret to inform you, etc.' This was not a subject on which he had ever allowed himself to dwell, more than in his changed circumstances he was

bound to dwell. Every soldier, normally, expects to get through. But of course he had done everything that was necessary for Nelly. His will was in the proper hands; and the night before their wedding he had written a letter to her, to be given her if he fell. Otherwise he had taken little account of possible death; nor had it cost him any trouble to banish the thought of it.

But the beauty of the evening—of this old earth, which takes no account of the perishing of men—and Nelly's warm life beside him, hanging upon his, perhaps already containing within it the mysterious promise of another life, had suddenly brought upon him a tremor of soul—an inward shudder. Did he really believe in existence after death—in a meeting again, in some dim other scene, if they were violently parted now? He had been confirmed while at school. His parents were Church people of a rather languid type, and it seemed the natural thing to do. Since then he had occasionally taken the Communion, largely to please an elder school-friend, who was ardently devout, and was now a Chaplain on the Western front. But what did it really mean to him? —what would it mean to *her*—if she were left alone? Images passed through his mind—the sights of the trenches—shattered and dying bodies. What was the *soul?*—had it really an independent life? *Something* there was in men—quite rough and common men—something revealed by war and the sufferings of war—so splendid, so infinitely beyond anything he

had ever dreamed of in ordinary life, that to think of it roused in him a passion of hidden feeling—perhaps adoration—but vague and speechless—adoration of he knew not what. He did not speak easily of his feeling, even to his young wife, to whom marriage had so closely, so ineffably bound him. But as he lay on the grass looking up at her—smiling—obeying her command of silence, his thoughts ranged irrepressibly. Supposing he fell, and she lived on—years and years—to be an old woman? Old! Nelly? Impossible! He put his hand gently on the slender foot, and felt the pulsing life in it. 'Dearest!' she murmured at his touch, and their eyes met tenderly.

'I should be content—' he thought—'if we could just live *this* life out! I don't believe I should want another life. But to go—and leave her; to go—just at the beginning—before one knows anything—before one has finished anything—'

And again his eyes wandered from her to the suffusion of light and colour on the lake. 'How could anyone ever want anything better than this earth—this life—at its best—if only one were allowed a full and normal share of it!' And he thought again, almost with a leap of exasperation, of those dead and mangled men—out there—in France. Who was responsible—God?—or man? But man's will is—must be—something dependent—something included in God's will. If God really existed, and if He willed war, and sudden death—then there must be another life. Or else the power that devised the

world was not a good, but an evil—at best, a blind one.

But while his young brain was racing through the old puzzles in the old ways, Nelly was thinking of something quite different. Her delicate small face kept breaking into little smiles with pensive intervals—till at last she broke out—

'Do you remember how I caught you—turning back to look after us—just here—just about here? You had passed that thorn tree—'

He came back to love-making with delight.

'"Caught me!" I like that! As if you weren't looking back too! How else did you know anything about me?'

He had taken his seat beside her on the rock, and her curly black head was nestling against his shoulder. There was no one on mountain path, no one on the lake. Occasionally from the main road on the opposite shore there was a passing sound of wheels. Otherwise the world was theirs—its abysses of shadow, its 'majesties of light.'

She laughed joyously, not attempting to contradict him. It was on this very path, just two months before the war, that they had first seen each other. She with her father and Bridget were staying at Mrs. Weston's lodgings, because she, Nelly, had had influenza, and the doctor had sent her away for a change. They knew the Lakes well already, as is the way of Manchester folk. Their father, a hard-worked, and often melancholy man, had delighted in

them, summer and winter, and his two girls had trudged about the fells with him year after year, and wanted nothing different or better. At least, Nelly had always been content. Bridget had grumbled often, and proposed Blackpool, or Llandudno, or Eastbourne for a change. But their father did not like 'crowds.' They came to the Lakes always before or after the regular season. Mr. Cookson hated the concourse of motorists in August, and never would use one himself. Not even when they went from Ambleside to Keswick. They must always walk, or go by the horse-coach.

Nelly presently looked up, and gave a little pull to the corner of her husband's moustache.

'Of course you know you behaved abominably that next day at Wythburn! You kept that whole party waiting while you ran after us. And I hadn't dropped that bag. You knew very well I hadn't dropped it!'

He chuckled.

'It did as well as anything else. I got five minutes' talk with you. I found out where you lodged.'

'Poor papa!'—said Nelly reflectively—'he was so puzzled. "There's that fellow we saw at Wythburn again! Why on earth does he come here to fish? I never saw anybody catch a thing in this bit of the river." Poor papa!'

They were both silent a little. Mr. Cookson had not lived long enough to see Nelly and George Sarratt engaged. The war had killed him. Financial

embarrassment was already closing on him when it broke out, and he could not stand the shock and the general dislocation of the first weeks, as sounder men could. The terror of ruin broke him down—and he was dead before Christmas, nominally of bronchitis and heart failure. Nelly had worn mourning for him up to her wedding day. She had been very sorry for 'poor papa'—and very fond of him; whereas Bridget had been rather hard on him always. For really he had done his best. After all he had left them just enough to live upon. Nelly's conscience, grown tenderer than of old under the touch of joy, pricked her as she thought of her father. She knew he had loved her best of his two daughters. She would always remember his last lingering hand-clasp, always be thankful for his last few words—'God bless you, dear.' But had she cared for him enough in return?—had she really tried to understand him? Some vague sense of the pathos of age—of its isolation—its dumb renouncements—gripped her. If he had only lived longer! He would have been so proud of George.

She roused herself.

'You did really make up your mind—*then?*' she asked him, just for the pleasure of hearing him confess it again.

'Of course I did! But what was the good?'

She knew that he meant it had been impossible to speak while his mother was still alive, and he, her only child, was partly dependent upon her. But his

mother had died not long after Nelly's father, and her little income had come to her son. So now what with Nelly's small portion, and his mother's two hundred and fifty a year in addition to his pay, the young subaltern thought himself almost rich—in comparison with so many others. His father, who had died while he was still at school, had been a master at Harrow, and he had been brought up in a refined home, with high standards and ideals. A scholarship at Oxford at one of the smaller colleges, a creditable degree, then an opening in the office of a well-known firm of solicitors, friends of his father, and a temporary commission, as soon as war broke out, on his record as a keen and diligent member of the Harrow and Oxford O.T.C.'s:—these had been the chief facts of his life up to August 1914;—that August which covered the roads leading to the Aldershot headquarters, day by day, with the ever-renewed columns of the army to be, with masses of marching men, whose eager eyes said one thing only—*'Training!—training!'*

The war, and the causes of the war, had moved his nature, which was sincere and upright, profoundly; all the more perhaps because of a certain kindling and awakening of the whole man, which had come from his first sight of Nelly Cookson in the previous June, and from his growing friendship with her—which he must not yet call love. He had decided however after three meetings with her that he would never marry anyone else. Her softness, her

yieldingness, her delicate beauty intoxicated him. He rejoiced that she was no 'new woman,' but only a very girlish and undeveloped creature, who would naturally want his protection as well as his love. For it was his character to protect and serve. He had protected and served his mother—faithfully and well. And as she was dying, he had told her about Nelly—not before; only to find that she knew it all, and that the only soreness he had ever caused her came from the secrecy which he had tenderly thought her due.

But for all his sanity and sweet temper there was a hard tough strain in him, which had made war so far, even through the horrors of it, a great absorbing game to him, for which he knew himself fitted, in which he meant to excel. Several times during the fighting that led up to Neuve Chapelle he had drawn the attention of his superiors, both for bravery and judgment; and after Neuve Chapelle, he had been mentioned in despatches. He had never yet known fear in the field—never even such a shudder at the unknown—which was yet the possible!—as he had just been conscious of. His nerves had always been strong, his nature was in the main simple. Yet for him, as well as for so many other 'fellows' he knew, the war had meant a great deal of this new and puzzled thinking—on problems of right and wrong, of 'whence' and 'whither,' of the personal value of men—this man, or that man. By George, war brought them out!—these personal values. And the

general result for him, up to now,—had he been specially lucky?—had been a vast increase of faith in his fellow men, yes, and faith in himself, modest as he was. He was proud to be an English soldier—proud to the roots of his being. His quiet patriotism had become a passion; he knew now in what he had believed.

Yes—England for ever! An English home after the war—and English children. Oh, he hoped Nelly would have children! As he held her pressed against him, he seemed to see her in the future—with the small things round her. But he did not speak of it.

She meanwhile was thinking of quite other things, and presently she said in a quick, troubled voice—

'George!—while you are away—you don't want me to do munitions?'

He laughed out.

'Munitions! I see you at a lathe! Dear—I don't think you'd earn your keep!' And he lifted her delicate arm and tiny hand, and looked at them with scientific curiosity. Her frail build was a constant wonder and pleasure to him. But small as she was, there was something unusual, some prophecy, perhaps, of developments to come, in the carriage of her head, and in some of her looks. Her education had been extremely slight, many of her ideas were still childish, and the circle from which she came had been inferior in birth and breeding to his own. But he had soon realised on their honeymoon, in

spite of her simple talk, that she was very quick—very intelligent.

'Because—' she went on, doubtfully—'there are so many other things I could do—quite useful things. There's sphagnum moss! Everybody up here is gathering sphagnum moss—you know—for bandages—upon the fells. I daresay Bridget might help in that. She won't do any other sort of war-work.'

'Why, I thought all women were doing some kind of war-work!'

'Bridget won't. She doesn't want to hear about the war at all. She's bored with it.'

'Bored with it! Good heavens!' Sarratt's countenance clouded. 'Darling—that'll be rather hard on you, if you and she are going to live together.'

Nelly lifted her head from his shoulder, and looked at him rather gravely.

'I'm afraid you don't know much about Bridget, George. She's,—well, she's—one of the—oddest women you ever met.'

'So it seems! But why is she bored with the war?'

'Well—you see—it doesn't matter to *her* in any way—and she doesn't want it to matter to her. There's nobody in it she cares about.'

'Thanks!' laughed Sarratt. But Nelly still grave, shook her head. 'Oh, she's not the least like other people. She won't care about you, George, just because you've married me. And—'

'And what? Is she still angry with me for not being rich?'

And his thoughts went back to his first interview with Bridget Cookson—on the day when their engagement was announced. He could see the tall sharp-featured woman now, standing with her back to the light in the little sitting-room of the Manchester lodgings. She had not been fierce or abusive at all. She had accepted it quietly—with only a few bitter sentences.

'All right, Mr. Sarratt. I have nothing to say. Nelly must please herself. But you've done her an injury! There are plenty of rich men that would have married her. You're very poor—and so are we.'

When the words were spoken, Nelly had just accepted him; she was her own mistress; he had not therefore taken her sister's disapproval much to heart. Still the words had rankled.

'Darling!—when I made you marry me—*did* I do you an injury?' he said suddenly, as they were walking again hand in hand along the high green path with the lake at their feet, and a vision of blue and rose before them, in the shadowed western mountains, the lower grounds steeped in fiery light, and the red reflections in the still water.

'What *do* you mean?' said Nelly, turning upon him a face of wonder.

'Well, that was what Bridget said to me, when I told her that you had accepted me. But I was a great

fool to tell you, darling! I'm sorry I did. It was only—'

'"Injury,"' repeated Nelly, not listening to him. 'Oh, yes, of course that was money. Bridget says it's all nonsense talking about honour, or love, or that kind of thing. Everything is really money. It was money that began this war. The Germans wanted our trade and our money—and we were determined they shouldn't have them—and that's all there is in it. With money you can have everything you want and a jolly life—and without money you can have nothing,—and are just nobody. When that rich old horror wanted to marry me last year in Manchester, Bridget thought me perfectly mad to refuse him. She didn't speak to me for a week. Of course he would have provided for her too.'

Sarratt had flushed hotly; but he spoke good-naturedly.

'Well, that was a miss for her—I quite see that. But after all we can help her a bit. We shall always feel that we must look after her. And why shouldn't she herself marry?'

Nelly laughed.

'Never! She hates men.'

There was a silence a moment. And then Sarratt said, rather gravely—'I say, darling, if she's going to make you miserable while I am away, hadn't we better make some other arrangement? I thought of course she would be good to you, and look after

you! Naturally any sister would, that was worth her salt!'

And he looked down indignantly on the little figure beside him. But it roused Nelly's mirth that he should put it in that way.

'George,—you *are* such a darling!—and—and, such a goose!' She rubbed her cheek against his arm as though to take the edge off the epithet. 'The idea of Bridget's wanting to "look after" me! She'll want to *manage* me of course—and I'd much better let her do it. I don't mind!' And the speaker gave a long, sudden sigh.

'But I won't have you troubled and worried, when I'm not there to protect you!' cried Sarratt, fiercely. 'You could easily find a friend.'

But Nelly shook her head.

'Oh, no. That wouldn't do. Bridget and I always get on, George. We never quarrelled—except when I stuck to marrying you. Generally—I always give in. It doesn't matter. It answers perfectly.'

She spoke with a kind of languid softness which puzzled him.

'But now you can't always give in, dearest! You belong to me!' And his grasp tightened on the hand he held.

'I can give in enough—to keep the peace,' said Nelly slowly. 'And if you weren't here, it wouldn't be natural that I shouldn't live with Bridget. I'm used to her. Only I want to make you understand

her, darling. She's not a bit like—well, like the people you admire, and its no good expecting her to be.'

'I shall talk to her before I go!' he said, half laughing, half resolved.

Nelly looked alarmed.

'No—please don't! She always gets the better of people who scold her. Or if you were to get the better, then she'd visit it on me. And now don't let's talk of her any more! What were we saying? Oh, I know—what I was to do. Let's sit down again,—there's a rock, made for us.'

And on a natural seat under a sheltering rock canopied and hung with fern, the two rested once more, wrapped in one cloak, close beside the water, which was quiet again, and crossed by the magical lights and splendid shadows of the dying sunset. Nelly had been full of plans when they sat down, but the nearness of the man she loved, his arm round her, his life beating as it were in one pulse with hers, intoxicated, and for a time silenced her. She had taken off her hat, and she lay quietly against him in the warm shelter of the cloak. He thought presently she was asleep. How small and dear she was! He bent over her, watching as closely as the now dim light allowed, the dark eyelashes lying on her cheek, her closed mouth, and soft breathing. His very own!—the thought was ecstasy—he forgot the war, and the few days left him.

But this very intensity of brooding love in which he held her, made her restless after a little. She sat up, and smiled at him—

'We must go home!—Yes, we must. But look! —there is a boat!'

And only a few yards from them, emerging from the shadows, they saw a boat rocking gently at anchor beside a tiny landing-stage. Nelly sprang to her feet.

'George!—suppose you were just to row us out—there—into the light!'

But when they came to the boat they found it padlocked to a post in the little pier.

'Ah, well, never mind,' said Nelly—'I'm sure that man won't forget?'

'That man who spoke to us? Who was he?'

'Oh, I found out from Bridget, and Mrs. Weston. He's Sir William Farrell, a great swell, tremendously rich. He has a big place somewhere, out beyond Keswick, beyond Bassenthwaite. You saw he had a stiff knee?'

'Yes. Can't fight, I suppose—poor beggar! He was very much struck by *you,* Mrs. George Sarratt!—that was plain.'

Nelly laughed—a happy childish laugh.

'Well, if he does get us leave to boat, you needn't mind, need you? What else, I wonder, could he do for us?'

'Nothing!' The tone was decided. 'I don't like being beholden to great folk. But that, I sup-

pose, is the kind of man whom Bridget would have liked you to marry, darling?'

'As if he would ever have looked at me!' said Nelly tranquilly. 'A man like that may be as rich as rich, but he would never marry a poor wife.'

'Thank God, I don't believe money will matter nearly as much to people, after the war!' said Sarratt, with energy. 'It's astonishing how now, in the army—of course it wasn't the same before the war—you forget it entirely. Who cares whether a man's rich, or who's son he is? In my batch when I went up to Aldershot there were men of all sorts, stockbrokers, landowners, city men, manufacturers, solicitors, some of them awfully rich, and then clerks, and schoolmasters, and lots of poor devils, like myself. We didn't care a rap, except whether a man took to his drill, or didn't; whether he was going to keep the Company back or help it on. And it's just the same in the field. Nothing counts but what you *are*—it doesn't matter a brass hap'orth what you have. And as the new armies come along that'll be so more and more. It's "Duke's son and Cook's son," everywhere, and all the time. If it was that in the South African war, it's twenty times that now. This war is bringing the nation together as nothing ever has done, or could do. War is hellish!—but there's a deal to be said for it!'

He spoke with ardour, as they strolled homeward, along the darkening shore, she hanging on his arm. Nelly said nothing. Her little face showed

very white in the gathering shadows. He went on.

'There was a Second Lieutenant in our battalion, an awfully handsome boy—heir to a peerage I think. But he couldn't get a commission quick enough to please him when the war broke out, so he just enlisted —oh! of course they've given him a commission long ago. But his great friend was a young miner, who spoke broad Northumberland, a jolly chap. And these two stuck together—we used to call them the Heavenly Twins. And in the fighting round Hill 60, the miner got wounded, and lay out between the lines, with the Boche shells making hell round him. And the other fellow never rested till he'd crawled out to him, and taken him water, and tied him up, and made a kind of shelter for him. The miner was a big fellow, and the other was just a slip of a boy. So he couldn't drag in his friend, but he got another man to go out with him, and between them they did it right enough. And when I was in the clearing station next day, I saw the two—the miner in bed, awfully smashed up, and the other sitting by him. It made one feel choky. The boy could have put down a cool hundred thousand, I suppose, if it could have done any good. But it wouldn't. I can tell you, darling, this war knocks the nonsense out of a man!'

'But Bridget is a woman!' said a dreamy voice beside him.

Sarratt laughed; but he was launched on recollections and could not stop himself. Apparently

everybody in his company was a hero, and had deserved the Military Cross ten times over, except himself. He described some incidents he had personally seen, and through the repressed fire with which he spoke, the personality and ideals of the man revealed themselves—normal, strong, self-forgetting. Had he even forgotten the little creature beside him? Hardly, for instinctively he softened away some of the terrible details of blood and pain. But he had forgotten Nelly's prohibition. And when again they had entered the dark wood which lay between them and the cottage on the river-bank, suddenly he heard a trembling breath, and a sob.

He caught her in his arms.

'Nelly, darling! Oh, I was a brute to talk to you like this.'

'No,' she said, struggling with herself—'No! Wait a moment.' She lay against him trembling through every limb, while he kissed and comforted her.

'I'm—I'm not a coward, George!' she said at last, gasping,—'I'm not indeed. Only—well, this morning I had about a hundred and seventy hours left—I counted them. And now there are fifteen less. And all the time, while we talk, they are slipping away, so quick—so quick—'

But she was regaining self-control, and soon released herself.

'I won't do it again!' she said piteously, in the

tone of a penitent child. 'I won't indeed. Let's go home. I'm all right.'

And home they sped, hand in hand, silently. The little room when they re-entered it was bright with fire-light, because kind Mrs. Weston had thought the night chilly, and the white table laid out for them —its pretty china and simple fare—tempted and cheered them with its look of home. But Nelly lay on the sofa afterwards very pale, though smiling and talking as usual. And through the night she was haunted, sleeping and waking, by the image of the solitary boat rocking gently on the moonlit lake, the water lapping its sides. She saw herself and George adrift in it—sailing into—disappearing in—that radiance of silver light. Sleepily she hoped that Sir William Farrell would not forget his promise.

CHAPTER III

'MAY I come in?'

Nelly Sarratt, who was standing beside the table in the sitting-room, packing a small luncheon-basket with sandwiches and cake, looked up in astonishment. Then she went to the door which was slightly ajar, and opened it.

She beheld a very tall man standing smiling on the threshold.

'I hope I'm not disturbing you, Mrs. Sarratt—but I was on my way for a day's sketching, and as my car passed your house, I thought I would like to bring you, myself, the permission which I spoke of on Saturday. I wrote yesterday, my friend was away from home but I got a telegram this morning.'

The visitor held out a telegram, which Nelly took in some bewilderment. It fluttered her to be so much thought for by a stranger—and a stranger moreover who seemed but to wave his wand and things were done. But she thanked him heartily.

'Won't you come in, Sir William?' she asked him, shyly. 'My husband will be here directly.'

It pleased him that she had found out who he was. He protested that he mustn't stay a moment, but all

the same he came in, and stood with his hands in his pockets looking at the view. He seemed to Nelly to fill the little sitting-room. Not that he was stout. There was not an ounce of superfluous flesh on him anywhere. But he stood at least six foot four in his boots; his shoulders were broad in proportion; and his head, with its strong curly hair of a light golden brown, which was repeated in his short beard, carried itself with the unconscious ease of one who has never known anything but the upper seats of life. His features were handsome, except for a broad irregular mouth, and his blue eyes were kind and lazily humorous.

'There's nothing better than that lake,' he said, motioning towards it, with his hand, as though he followed the outlines of the hills. 'But I never try to draw it. I leave that to the fellows who think they can! I'm afraid your permit's only for a week, Mrs. Sarratt. The boat, I find, will be wanted after that.'

'Oh, but my husband will be gone in a week—less than a week. I couldn't row myself!' said Nelly, smiling.

But Sir William thought the smile trembled a little, and he felt very sorry for the small, pretty creature.

'You will be staying on here after your husband goes?'

'Oh yes. My sister will be with me. We know the Lakes very well.'

'Staying through the summer, I suppose?'

'I shan't want to move—if the war goes on. We haven't any home of our own—yet.'

She had seated herself, and spoke with the self-possession which belongs to those who know themselves fair to look upon. But there seemed to be no coquetry about her—no consciousness of a male to be attracted. All her ways were very gentle and childish, and in her white dress she made the same impression on Farrell as she had on Bridget, of extreme—absurd—youthfulness. He guessed her age about nineteen, perhaps younger.

'I'm afraid the war will go on,' he said, kindly. 'We are only now just finding out our deficiencies.'

Nelly sighed.

'I know—it's *awful* how we want guns and shells! My husband says it makes him savage to see how we lose men for want of them. *Why* are we so short? Whose fault is it?'

A spot of angry colour had risen in her cheek. It was the dove defending her mate. The change was lovely, and Farrell, with his artist's eye, watched it eagerly. But he shook his head.

'It's nobody's fault. It's all on such a scale—unheard of! Nobody could have guessed beforehand—unless like Germany, we had been preparing for years to rob and murder our neighbours. Well, Mrs. Sarratt, I must be going on. But I wanted to say, that if we could do anything for you—please command us. We live about twenty miles from here. My sister hopes she may come and see you. And we

have a big library at Carton. If there are any books you want——'

'Oh, how *very* kind of you!' said Nelly gratefully. She had risen and was standing beside him, looking at him with her dark, frank eyes. 'But indeed I shall get on very well. There's a war workroom in Manchester, which will send me work. And I shall try and help with the sphagnum moss. There's a notice up near here, asking people to help. And perhaps'—she laughed and colored—'I shall try to sketch a little. I can't do it a bit—but it amuses me.'

'Oh, you *draw?*' said Farrell, with a smile. Then, looking round him, he noticed a portfolio on the table, with a paint box beside it. 'May I look?'

With rather red cheeks, Nelly showed her performances. She knew very well, being accustomed to follow such things in the newspapers, that Sir William Farrell had exhibited both in London and Manchester, and was much admired by some of the critics.

Farrell twisted his mouth over them a good deal, considering them carefully.

'Yes, I see—I see exactly where you are. Not bad at all, some of them. I could lend you some things which would help you I think. Ah, here is your husband.'

George Sarratt entered, looking in some surprise at their very prompt visitor, and a little inclined to stand on his guard against a patronage that might

be troublesome. But Farrell explained himself so apologetically that the young man could only add his very hearty thanks to his wife's.

'Well, I really *must* be off,' said Farrell again, looking for his hat. 'And I see you are going out for the day.' He glanced at the lunch preparations. 'Do you know Loughrigg Tarn?' He turned to Nelly.

'Oh, yes!' Her face glowed. 'Isn't it beautiful? But I don't think George knows it.' She looked up at him. He smiled and shook his head.

'I have a cottage there,' said Farrell, addressing Sarratt. 'Wordsworth said it was like Nemi. It isn't:—but it's beautiful all the same. I wish you would bring your wife there to tea with me one day before you go? There is an old woman who looks after me. This view is fine'—he pointed to the window—'but I think mine is finer.'

'Thank you,' said Sarratt, rather formally—'but I am afraid our days are getting pretty full.'

'Of course, of course!' said Sir William, smiling. 'I only meant, if you happened to be walking in that direction and want a rest. I have a number of drawings there—my own and other people's, which Mrs. Sarratt might care to see—sometime. You go on Saturday?'

'Yes. I'm due to rejoin by Monday.'

Farrell's expression darkened.

'You see what keeps me?' he said, sharply, strik-

ing his left knee with the flat of his hand. 'I had a bad fall, shooting in Scotland, years ago—when I was quite a lad. Something went wrong in the knee-cap. The doctors muffed it, and I have had a stiff knee ever since. I daresay they'd give me work at the War Office—or the Admiralty. Lots of fellows I know who can't serve are doing war-work of that kind. But I can't stand office work—never could. It makes me ill, and in a week of it I am fit to hang myself. I live out of doors. I've done some recruiting—speaking for the Lord Lieutenant. But I can't speak worth a cent—and I do no good. No fellow ever joined up because of my eloquence!—couldn't if he tried. No—I've given up my house—it was the best thing I could do. It's a jolly house, and I've got lots of jolly things in it. But the War Office and I between us have turned it into a capital hospital. We take men from the Border regiments mostly. I wonder if I shall ever be able to live in it again! My sister and I are now in the agent's house. I work at the hospital three or four days a week—and then I come here and sketch. I don't see why I shouldn't.'

He straightened his shoulder as though defying somebody. Yet there was something appealing, and, as it were, boyish, in the defiance. The man's patriotic conscience could be felt struggling with his dillettantism. Sarratt suddenly liked him.

'No, indeed,' he said heartily. 'Why shouldn't you?'

'It's when one thinks of *your* job, one feels a brute to be doing anything one likes.'

'Well, you'd be doing the same job if you could. That's all right!' said Sarratt smiling.

It was curious how in a few minutes the young officer had come to seem the older and more responsible of the two men. Yet Farrell was clearly his senior by some ten or fifteen years. Instinctively Nelly moved nearer to George. She liked to feel how easily he could hold his own with great people, who made *her* feel nervous. For she understood from Mrs. Weston that the Farrells were very great people indeed, as to money and county position, and that kind of thing.

Sarratt took his visitor downstairs, and returned, laughing to himself.

'Well, darling, I've promised we'll go to his cottage one day this week. You've to let him know. He's an odd fellow! Reminds me of that story of the young Don at Cambridge who spent all the time he could spare from neglecting his duties in adorning his person. And yet that doesn't hit it quite either. For I don't suppose he does spend much time in adorning his person. He doesn't want it. He's such a splendid looking chap to begin with. But I'm sure his duties have a poor time! Why, he told me—me, an utter stranger!—as we went downstairs—that being a landowner was the most boring trade in the world. He hated his tenants, and turned all the bother of them over to his agents. "But they don't

hate me "—he said—" because I don't put the screw on. I'm rich enough without." By Jove, he's a queer specimen!'

And Sarratt laughed out, remembering some further items of the conversation on the stairs.

'Whom are you discussing?' said a cold voice in the background.

It was Bridget Cookson's voice, and the husband and wife turned to greet her. The day was balmy—June at its best. But Bridget as she came in had the look of someone rasped with east wind. Nelly noticed too that since her marrage, Bridget had developed an odd habit of not looking her—or George—straight in the face. She looked sideways, as though determined to avoid the mere sight of their youth and happiness. 'Is she going to make a quarrel of it all our lives?' thought Nelly impatiently. 'And when George is so nice to her! How can she be so silly!'

'We were talking about our visitor who has just left,' said Sarratt, clearing a chair for his sister-in-law. 'Ah, you came from the other direction, you just missed him.'

'The man'—said Nelly—'who was so awfully polite to me on Saturday—Sir William Farrell.'

Bridget's countenance lost its stiffness at once—became eager and alert.

'What did he come for?'

'To bring us permission to use the boat for a

week,' said Nelly. 'Wasn't it decent of him?—and to do it so quick!'

'Oh, that's the Farrell way—always was,' said Bridget complacently, as though she had the family in her pocket. 'When they think of a thing it's done. It's hit or miss. They never stop to think.'

Sarratt looked at his sister-in-law with a covert amusement. It was a left-handed remark. But she went on—while Nelly finished the packing of the luncheon-basket—pouring out a flood of gossip about the Farrells's place near Cockermouth, their great relations, their wealth, their pictures, and their china, while Sarratt walked up and down, fidgeting with his mouth, and inwardly thanking his stars that his Nelly was not the least like her sister, that she was as refined and well-bred, as Bridget was beginning to seem to him vulgar and tiresome. But he realised that there was a personality in the tall harsh woman; that she might be formidable; and once or twice he found himself watching the curious side-long action of her head and neck, and the play of her eyes and mouth, with a mingling of close attention and strong dislike. He kept his own counsel however; and presently he heard Bridget, who had so far refused all their invitations to join their walks or excursions, rather eagerly accepting Nelly's invitation to go with them to Sir William's Loughrigg cottage. She knew all about it apparently, and said it was 'a gem of a place!' Sir William kept an old butler and his wife

there—pensioned off—who looked after him when he came. 'Everything's tiny,' said Bridget with emphasis—'but *perfect!* Sir William has the most exquisite taste. But he never asks anybody to go there. None of the neighbours know him. So of course they say its "side," and he gives himself airs. Anyway, Nelly, you may think yourselves highly honoured——'

'Darling, isn't that basket ready?' said Sarratt, coming to his wife's aid. 'We're losing the best of the day—and if Bridget really won't go with us——'

Bridget frowned and rose.

'How are the proofs getting on?' said Sarratt, smiling, as she bade him a careless good-bye.

Bridget drew herself up.

'I never talk about my work.'

'I suppose that's a good rule,' he said doubtfully, 'especially now that there's so much else to talk about. The Russian news to-day is pretty bad!'

A dark look of anxiety crossed the young man's face. For it was the days of the great Russian retreat in Galicia and Poland, and every soldier looking on, knew with gnashing of teeth that the happenings in the East meant a long postponement of our own advance.

'Oh, I never trouble about the war!' said Bridget, with a half-contemptuous note in her voice that fairly set George Sarratt on fire. He flushed violently, and Nelly looked at him in alarm. But he said nothing. Nelly however with a merry side-glance at

him, unseen by Bridget, interposed to prevent him from escorting Bridget downstairs. She went herself. Most sisters would have dispensed with or omitted this small attention; but Nelly always treated Bridget with a certain ceremony. When she returned, she threw her arms round George's neck, half laughing, and half inclined to cry.

'Oh, George, I do wish I had a nicer sister to give you!' But George had entirely recovered himself.

'We shall get on perfectly!' he declared, kissing the soft head that leant against him. 'Give me a little time, darling. She's new to me!—I'm new to her.'

Nelly sighed, and went to put on her hat. In her opinion it was no more easy to like Bridget after three years than three hours. It was certain that she and George would never suit each other. At the same time Nelly was quite conscious that she owed Bridget a good deal. But for the fact that Bridget did the housekeeping, that Bridget saw to the investment of their small moneys, and had generally managed the business of their joint life, Nelly would not have been able to dream, and sketch, and read, as it was her delight to do. It might be, as she had said to Sarratt, that Bridget managed because she liked managing. All the same Nelly knew, not without some prickings of conscience as to her own dependence, that when George was gone, she would never be able to get on without Bridget.

Into what a world of delight the two plunged

when they set forth! The more it rains in the Westmorland country, the more heavenly are the days when the clouds forget to rain! There were white flocks of them in the June sky as the new-married pair crossed the wooden bridge beyond the garden, leading to the further side of the lake, but they were sailing serene and sunlit in the blue, as though their whole business were to dapple the hills with blue and violet shadows, or sometimes to throw a dazzling reflection down into the quiet water. There had been rain, torrential rain, just before the Sarratts arrived, so that the river was full and noisy, and all the little becks clattering down the fell, in their haste to reach the lake, were boasting to the summer air, as though in forty-eight hours of rainlessness they would not be as dry and dumb as ever again. The air was fresh, in spite of the Midsummer sun, and youth and health danced in the veins of the lovers. And yet not without a touch of something feverish, something abnormal, because of that day—that shrouded day—standing sentinel at the end of the week. They never spoke of it, but they never forgot it. It entered into each clinging grasp he gave her hand as he helped her up or down some steep or rugged bit of path—into the lingering look of her brown eyes, which thanked him, smiling—into the moments of silence, when they rested amid the springing bracken, and the whole scene of mountain, cloud and water spoke with that sudden tragic note of all supreme beauty, in a world of 'brittleness.'

But they were not often silent. There was so much to say. They were still exploring each other, after the hurry of their marriage, and short engagement. For a time she chattered to him about her own early life—their old red-brick house in a Manchester suburb, with its good-sized rooms, its mahogany doors, its garden, in which her father used to work—his only pleasure, after his wife's death, besides 'the concerts'—'You know we've awfully good music in Manchester!' As for her own scattered and scanty education, she had begun to speak of it almost with bitterness. George's talk and recollections betrayed quite unconsciously the standards of the academic or highly-trained professional class to which all his father's kindred belonged; and his only sister, a remarkably gifted girl, who had died of pneumonia at eighteen, just as she was going to Girton, seemed to Nelly, when he occasionally described or referred to her, a miracle—a terrifying miracle—of learning and accomplishment.

Once indeed, she broke out in distress:—

'Oh, George, I don't know anything! Why wasn't I sent to school! We had a wretched little governess who taught us nothing. And then I'm lazy—I never was ambitious—like Bridget. Do you mind that I'm so stupid—do you mind?'

And she laid her hands on his knee, as they sat together among the fern, while her eyes searched his face in a real anxiety.

What joy it was to laugh at her—to tease her!

'*How* stupid are you, darling? Tell me, exactly. It is of course a terrible business. If I'd only known—'

But she would be serious.

'I don't know *any* languages, George! Just a little French—but you'd be ashamed if you heard me talking it. As to history—don't ask!' She shrugged her shoulders despairingly. Then her face brightened. 'But there's something! I do love poetry—I've read a lot of poetry.'

'That's all right—so have I,' he said, promptly.

'Isn't it strange—' her tone was thoughtful—'how people care for poetry nowadays! A few years ago, one never heard of people—ordinary people—*buying* poetry, new poetry—or reading it. But I know a shop in Manchester that's just full of poetry—new books and old books—and the shopman told me that people buy it almost more than anything. Isn't it funny? What makes them do it? Is it the war?'

Sarratt considered it, while making a smooth path for a gorgeous green beetle through the bit of turf beside him.

'I suppose it's the war,' he said at last. 'It does change fellows. It's easy enough to go along bluffing and fooling in ordinary times. Most men don't know what they think—or what they feel—or whether they feel anything. But somehow—out there—when you see the things other fellows are

doing—when you know the things you may have to do yourself—well——'

'Yes, yes—go on!' she said eagerly, and he went on, but reluctantly, for he had seen her shiver, and the white lids fall a moment over her eyes.

'—it doesn't seem unnatural—or hypocritical—or canting—to talk and feel—sometimes—as you couldn't talk or feel at home, with life going on just as usual. I've had to censor letters, you see, darling—and the letters some of the roughest and stupidest fellows write, you'd never believe. And there's no pretence in it either. What would be the good of pretending out there? No—it's just the pace life goes—and the fire—and the strain of it. It's awful—and *horrible*—and yet you wouldn't not be there for the world.'

His voice dropped a little; he looked out with veiled eyes upon the lake chequered with the blue and white of its inverted sky. Nelly guessed—trembling—at the procession of images that was passing through them; and felt for a moment strangely separated from him—separated and desolate.

'George, it's dreadful now—to be a woman!'

She spoke in a low appealing voice, pressing up against him, as though she begged the soul in him that had been momentarily unconscious of her, to come back to her.

He laughed, and the vision before his eyes broke up.

'Darling, it's adorable now—to be a woman!

How I shall think of you, when I'm out there!—away from all the grime and the horror—sitting by this lake, and looking—as you do now.'

He drew a little further away from her, and lying on his elbows on the grass, he began to read her, as it were, from top to toe, that he might fix every detail in his mind.

'I like that little hat so much, Nelly!—and that blue cloak is just ripping! And what's that you've got at your waist—a silver buckle?—yes! I gave it you. Mind you wear it, when I'm away, and tell me you're wearing it—then I can fancy it.'

'Will you ever have time—to think of me—George?'

She bent towards him.

He laughed.

'Well, not when I'm going over the parapet to attack the Boches. Honestly, one thinks of nothing then but how one can get one's men across. But you won't come off badly, my little Nell—for thoughts—night or day. And you mustn't think of us too sentimentally. It's quite true that men write wonderful letters—and wonderful verse too—men of all ranks—things you'd never dream they could write. I've got a little pocket-book full that I've collected. I've left it in London, but I'll show you some day. But bless you, nobody *talks* about their feelings at the front. We're a pretty slangy lot in the trenches, and when we're in billets, we read novels and rag each other—and *sleep*—my word, we do sleep!'

He rolled on his back, and drew his hat over his eyes a moment, for even in the fresh mountain air the June sun was fierce. Nelly sat still, watching him, as he had watched her—all the young strength and comeliness of the man to whom she had given herself.

And as she did so there came swooping down upon her, like the blinding wings of a Fury, the remembrance of a battle picture she had seen that morning: a bursting shell—limp figures on the ground. Oh not George—not *George*—never! The agony ran through her, and her fingers gripped the turf beside her. Then it passed, and she was silently proud that she had been able to hide it. But it had left her pale and restless. She sprang up, and they went along the high path leading to Grasmere and Langdale.

Presently at the top of the little neck which separates Rydal from Grasmere they came upon an odd cavalcade. In front walked an elderly lady, with a huge open bag slung round her, in which she carried an amazing load of the sphagnum moss that English and Scotch women were gathering at that moment all over the English and Scotch mountains for the surgical purposes of the war. Behind her came a pony, with a boy. The pony was laden with the same moss, so was the boy. The lady's face was purple with exertion, and in her best days she could never have been other than plain; her figure was shapeless. She stopped the pony as she neared the Sarratts, and addressed them—panting.

'I beg your pardon!—but have you by chance seen another lady carrying a bag like mine? I brought a friend with me to help gather this stuff—but we seem to have missed each other on the top of Silver How—and I can't imagine what's happened to her.'

The voice was exceedingly musical and refined—but there was a touch of power in it—a curious note of authority. She stood, recovering breath and looking at the young people with clear and penetrating eyes, suddenly observant.

The Sarratts could only say that they had not come across any other moss-gatherer on the road.

The strange lady sighed—but with a half humorous, half philosophical lifting of the eyebrows.

'It was very stupid of me to miss her—but you really can't come to grief on these fells in broad daylight. However, if you do meet her—a lady with a sailor hat, and a blue jersey—will you tell her that I've gone on to Ambleside?'

Sarratt politely assured her that they would look out for her companion. He had never yet seen a grey-haired Englishwoman, of that age, carry so heavy a load, and he liked both her pluck and her voice. She reminded him of the French peasant women in whose farms he often lodged behind the lines. She meanwhile was scrutinising him—the badge on his cap, and the two buttons on his khaki sleeve.

'I think I know who you are,' she said, with a

sudden smile. 'Aren't you Mr. and Mrs. Sarratt? Sir William Farrell told me about you.' Then she turned to the boy—'Go on, Jim. I'll come soon.'

A conversation followed on the mountain path, in which their new acquaintance gave her name as Miss Hester Martin, living in a cottage on the outskirts of Ambleside, a cousin and old friend of Sir William Farrell; an old friend indeed, it seemed, of all the local residents; absorbed in war-work of different kinds, and somewhere near sixty years of age; but evidently neither too old nor too busy to have lost the natural interest of a kindly spinster in a bride and bridegroom, especially when the bridegroom was in khaki, and under orders for the front. She promised, at once, to come and see Mrs. Sarratt, and George, beholding in her a possible motherly friend for Nelly when he should be far away, insisted that she should fix a day for her call before his departure. Nelly added her smiles to his. Then, with a pleasant nod, Miss Martin left them, refusing all their offers to help her with her load. '"My strength is as the strength of ten,"' she said with a flash of fun in her eyes—'But I won't go on with the quotation. Good-bye.'

George and Nelly went on towards a spot above a wood in front of them to which she had directed them, as a good point to rest and lunch. She, meanwhile, pursued her way towards Ambleside, her thoughts much more occupied with the young couple than with her lost companion. The little thing was

a beauty, certainly. Easy to see what had attracted William Farrell! An uncommon type—and a very artistic type; none of your milk-maids. She supposed before long William would be proposing to draw her—hm!—with the husband away? It was to be hoped some watch-dog would be left. William was a good fellow—no real malice in him—had never *meant* to injure anybody, that she knew of—but—

Miss Martin's cogitations however went no farther in exploring that 'but.' She was really very fond of her cousin William, who bore an amount of discipline from her that no one else dared to apply to the owner of Carton. Tragic, that he couldn't fight! That would have brought out all there was in him.

CHAPTER IV

'GLORIOUS!'

Nelly Sarratt stood lost in the beauty of the spectacle commanded by Sir William Farrell's cottage. It was placed in a by-road on the western side of Loughrigg, that smallest of real mountains, beloved of poets and wanderers. The ground dropped sharply below it to a small lake or tarn, its green banks fringed with wood, while on the further side the purple crag and noble head of Wetherlam rose out of sunlit mist,—thereby indefinitely heightened—into a pearl and azure sky. To the north also, a splendid wilderness of fells, near and far; with the Pikes and Bowfell leading the host. White mists—radiant mists—perpetually changing, made a magic interweaving of fell with fell, of mountain with sky. Every tint of blue and purple, of amethyst and sapphire lay melted in the chalice carved out by the lake and its guardian mountains. Every line of that chalice was harmonious, as though each mountain and valley filled its place consciously, in a living order; and in the grandeur of the whole there was no terror, no hint of a world hostile and inaccessible to man, as in the Alps and the Rockies.

'These mountains are one's friends,' said Farrell,

smiling as he stood beside Nelly, pointing out the various peaks by name. 'If you know them only a little, you can trust yourself to them, at any hour of the day or night. Whereas, in the Alps, I always feel myself "a worm and no man"!'

'I have never been abroad,' said Nelly shyly.

For once he found an *ingénue* attractive.

'Then you have it to come—when the world is sane again. But some things you will have missed for ever. For instance, you will never see Rheims—as it was. I have spent months at Rheims in old days, drawing and photographing. I must show you my things. They have a tragic value now.'

And taking out a portfolio from a rack near him, he opened it and put it on a stand before her.

Nelly, who had in her the real instincts of the artist, turned over some very masterly drawings, in mingled delight and despair.

'If I could only do something like that!' she said, pointing to a study of some of the famous windows at Rheims, with vague forms of saint and king emerging from a conflagration of colour, kindled by the afternoon sun, and dyeing the pavement below.

'Ah, that took me some time. It was difficult. But here are some fragments you'll like—just bits from the façade and the monuments.'

The strength of the handling excited her. She looked at them in silence; remembering with disgust all the pretty sentimental work she had been used to

copy. She began to envisage what this commonly practised art may be; what a master can do with it. Standards leaped up. Alp on Alp appeared. When George was gone she would *work,* yes, she would work hard—to surprise him when he came back.

Sir William meanwhile was increasingly taken with his guest. She was shy, very diffident, very young; but in the few things she said, he discerned—or fancied—the stirrings of a real taste—real intelligence. And she was prettier and more fetching than ever—with her small dark head, and her lovely mouth. He would like to draw the free sensuous line of it, the beautiful moulding of the chin. What a prize for the young man! Was he aware of his own good fortune? Was he adequate?

'I say, how jolly!' said Sarratt, coming up to look. 'My wife, Sir William—I think she told you —has got a turn for this kind of thing. These will give her ideas.'

And while he looked at the drawings, he slipped a hand into his wife's arm, smiling down upon her, and commenting on the sketches. There was nothing in what he said. He only 'knew what he liked,' and an unfriendly bystander would have been amused by his constant assumption that Nelly's sketches were as good as anybody's. Entirely modest for himself, he was inclined to be conceited for her, she checking him, with rather flushed cheeks. But Farrell liked him all the better, both for the ignorance and the pride. The two young people standing there to-

gether, so evidently absorbed in each other, yet on the brink of no ordinary parting, touched the romantic note in him. He was very sorry for them—especially for the bride—and eagerly, impulsively wished to befriend them.

In the background, the stout lady whom the Sarratts had met on Loughrigg Terrace, Miss Hester Martin, was talking to Miss Farrell, while Bridget Cookson was carrying on conversation with a tall officer who carried his arm in a sling, and was apparently yet another convalescent officer from the Carton hospital, whom Cicely Farrell had brought over in her motor to tea at her brother's cottage. His name seemed to be Captain Marsworth, and he was doing his best with Bridget; but there were great gaps in their conversation, and Bridget resentfully thought him dull. Also she perceived—for she had extremely quick eyes in such matters—that Captain Marsworth, while talking to her, seemed to be really watching Miss Farrell, and she at once jumped to the conclusion that there was something 'up' between him and Miss Farrell.

Cicely Farrell certainly took no notice of him. She was sitting perched on the high end of a sofa smoking a cigarette and dangling her feet, which were encased, as before, in high-heeled shoes and immaculate gaiters. She was dressed in white serge with a cap and jersey of the brightest possible green. Her very open bodice showed a string of fine pearls, and she wore pearl ear-rings. Seen in the same room

with Nelly Sarratt she could hardly be guessed at less than twenty-eight. She was the mature woman in full possession of every feminine weapon, experienced, subtle, conscious, a little hard, a little malicious. Nelly Sarratt beside her looked a child. Miss Farrell had glanced at her with curiosity, but had not addressed many words to her. She had concluded at once that it was a type that did not interest her. It interested William of course, because he was professionally on the look out for beauty. But that was his affair. Miss Farrell had no use for anything so unfledged and immature. And as for the sister, Miss Cookson, she had no points of attraction whatever. The young man, the husband, was well enough —apparently a gentleman; but Miss Farrell felt that she would have forgotten his existence when the tea-party was over. So she had fallen back on conversation with her cousin. That Cousin Hester—dear, shapeless, Puritanical thing!—disapproved of her, her dress, her smoking, her ways, and her opinions, Cicely well knew—but that only gave zest to their meetings, which were not very frequent.

Meanwhile Bridget, in lieu of conversation and while tea was still preparing, was making mental notes of the cottage. It consisted apparently of two sitting-rooms, and a studio—in which they were to have tea—with two or three bedrooms above. It had been developed out of a Westmorland farm, but developed beyond recognition. The spacious rooms panelled in plain oak, were furnished sparely, with

few things, but those of the most beautiful and costly kind. Old Persian rugs and carpets, a few Renaissance mirrors, a few priceless 'pots,' a picture or two, hangings and coverings of a dim purple—the whole, made by these various items and objects, expressed a taste perhaps originally florid, but tamed by long and fastidious practice of the arts of decoration.

In the study where tea had been laid, Nelly could not restrain her wonder and delight. On one wall hung ten of the most miraculous Turners—drawings from his best period, each of them irreplaceably famous. Another wall showed a group of Boningtons—a third a similar gathering of Whistlers. Sir William, charmed with the bride's pleasure, took down drawing after drawing, carried them to the light for her, and discoursed upon them.

'Would you like that to copy?'—he said, putting a Turner into her lap—a marvel of blue mountain peaks, and winding river, and aerial distance.

'Oh, I shouldn't dare—I should be afraid!' said Nelly, hardly liking to take the treasure in her own hands. 'Aren't they—aren't they worth immense sums?'

Sir William laughed.

'Well, of course, they're valuable—everybody wants them. But if you would ever like that one to copy, you shall have it, and any other that would help you. I know you wouldn't let it be hurt, if you could help it—because you'd love it—as I do. You

wouldn't let a Turner drawing like that fade and blister in the sun—as I've seen happen again and again in houses he painted them for. Brutes! Hanging's too good for people who maltreat Turners. Let me relieve you of it now. I must get you some tea. But the drawing will come to you next week. You won't be able to think of it till then.'

He looked at her with the ardent sympathy which sprang easily from his quick, emotional temperament, and made it possible for him to force his way rapidly into intimacy, where he desired to be intimate. But Nelly shrank into herself. She put the drawing away, and did not seem to care to look at any more. Farrell wished he had left his remark unspoken, and finding that he had somehow extinguished her smiles and her talk, he relieved her of his company, and went away to talk to Sarratt and Captain Marsworth. As soon as tea was over, Nelly beckoned to her husband.

'Are you going so soon?' said Hester Martin, who had been unobtrusively mothering her, since Farrell left her—'When may I come and see you?'

'To-morrow?' said Nelly vaguely, looking up. 'George hoped you would come, before he goes. There are—there are only three days.'

'I will come to-morrow,' said Miss Martin, touching Nelly's hand softly. The cold, small fingers moved, as though instinctively, towards her, and took refuge in her warm capacious hand. Then Nelly whispered to Bridget—appealingly—

'I want to go, Bridget.'

Bridget frowned with annoyance. Why should Nelly want to go so soon? The beauty and luxury of the cottage—the mere tea-table with all its perfect appointments of fine silver and china, the multitude of cakes, the hot-house fruit, the well-trained butler—all the signs of wealth that to Nelly were rather intimidating, and to Sarratt—in war-time—incongruous and repellent, were to Bridget the satisfaction of so many starved desires. This ease and lavishness; the best of everything and no trouble to get it; the 'cottage' as perfect as the palace;—it was so, she felt, that life should be lived, to be really worth living. She envied the Farrells with an intensity of envy. Why should some people have so much and others so little? And as she watched Sir William's attentions to Nelly, she said to herself, for the hundredth time, that but for Nelly's folly, she could easily have captured wealth like this. Why not Sir William himself? It would not have been at all unlikely that they should come across him on one of their Westmorland holidays. The thought of their dingy Manchester rooms, of the ceaseless care and economy that would be necessary for their joint ménage when Sarratt was gone, filled her with disgust. Their poverty was wholly unnecessary—it was Nelly's silly fault. She felt at times as though she hated her brother-in-law, who had so selfishly crossed their path, and ruined the hopes and dreams which had been strengthening steadily in her mind during

the last two years especially, since Nelly's beauty had become more pronounced.

'It's not at all late!' she said, angrily, in her sister's ear.

'Oh, but George wants to take me to Easedale,' said Nelly under her breath. 'It will be our last long walk.'

Bridget had to submit to be torn away. A little motor was waiting outside. It had brought the Sarratts and Bridget from Rydal, and was to take Bridget home, dropping the Sarratts at Grasmere for an evening walk. Sir William tried indeed to persuade them to stay longer, till a signal from his cousin Hester stopped him; 'Well, if you must go, you must,' he said, regretfully. 'Cicely, you must arrange with Mrs. Sarratt, when she will pay us a visit—and'—he looked uncertainly round him, as though he had only just remembered Bridget's existence—'of course your sister must come too.'

Cicely came forward, and with a little lisp, repeated her brother's invitation—rather perfunctorily.

Sir William took his guests to their car, and bade a cordial farewell to Sarratt.

'Good-bye—and good luck. What shall I wish you? The D.S.O., and a respectable leave before the summer's over? You will be in for great things.'

Sarratt shook his head.

'Not till we get more guns, and tons more shell!'

'Oh, the country's waking up!'

'It's about time!' said Sarratt, gravely, as he climbed into the car. Sir William bent towards him.

'Anything that we can do to help your wife and her sister, during their stay here, you may be sure we shall do.'

'It's very kind of you,' said the young officer gratefully, as he grasped Farrell's hand. And Nelly sent a shy glance of thanks towards the speaker, while Bridget sat erect and impassive.

Sir William watched them disappear, and then returned to the tea-room. He was received with a burst of laughter from his sister.

'Well, Willy, so you're caught—fairly caught! What am I to do? When am I to ask her? And the sister too?'

And lighting another cigarette, Cicely looked at her brother with mocking eyes.

Farrell reddened a little, but kept his temper.

'In a week or two I should think, you might ask her, when she's got over her husband's going away.'

'They get over it very soon—in general,' said Cicely coolly.

'Not that sort.'

The voice was Captain Marsworth's.

Cicely appeared to take no notice. But her eyelids flickered. Hester Martin interposed.

'A dear, little, appealing thing,' she said, warmly —'and her husband evidently a capital fellow. I didn't take to the sister—but who knows? She may

be an excellent creature, all the same. I'm glad I shall be so near them. It will be a help to that poor child to find her something to do.'

Cicely laughed.

'You think she'll hunt sphagnum—and make bandages? I don't.'

'Why this "thusness?"' said Miss Martin raising her eyebrows. 'What has made you take a dislike to the poor little soul, Cicely? There never was anyone more plainly in love——'

'Or more to be pitied,' said the low voice in the background—low but emphatic.

It was now Cicely's turn to flush.

'Of course I know I'm a beast,' she said defiantly,—'but the fact is I didn't like either of them! —the sisters, I mean.'

'What on earth is there to dislike in Mrs. Sarratt!' cried Farrell. 'You're quite mad, Cicely.'

'She's too pretty,' said Miss Farrell obstinately—'and too—too simple. And nobody as pretty as that can be really simple. It's only pretence.'

As she spoke Cicely rose to her feet, and began to put on her veil in front of one of the old mirrors. 'But of course, Will, I shall behave nicely to your friends. Don't I always behave nicely to them?'

She turned lightly to her brother, who looked at her only half appeased.

'I shan't give you a testimonial to-day, Cicely.'

'Then I must do without it. Well, this day three

weeks, a party at Carton, for Mrs. Sarratt. Will that give her time to settle down?'

'Unless her husband is killed by then,' said Captain Marsworth, quietly. 'His regiment is close to Loos. He'll be in the thick of it directly.'

'Oh no,' said Cicely, twisting the ends of her veil lightly between a finger and thumb. 'Just a "cushy" wound, that'll bring him home on a three months' leave, and give her the bore of nursing him.'

'Cicely, you are a hard-hearted wretch!' said her brother, angrily. 'I think Marsworth and I will go and stroll till the motor is ready.'

The two men disappeared, and Cicely let herself drop into an arm-chair. Her eyes, as far as could be seen through her veil, were blazing; the redness in her cheeks had improved upon the rouge with which they were already touched; and the gesture with which she pulled on her gloves was one of excitement.

'Cicely dear—what is the matter with you?' said Miss Martin in distress. She was fond of Cicely, in spite of that young lady's extravagances of dress and manner, and she divined something gone wrong.

'Nothing is the matter—nothing at all. It is only necessary, sometimes, to shock people,' said Cicely, calming down. She threw her head back against the chair and closed her eyes, while her lips still smiled triumphantly.

'Were you trying to shock Captain Marsworth?'

'It's so easy—it's hardly worth doing,' said

Cicely, sleepily. Then after a pause—'Ah, isn't that the motor?'

Meanwhile the little hired motor from Ambleside had dropped the Sarratts on the Easedale road, and carried Bridget away in an opposite direction, to the silent but great relief of the newly-married pair. And soon the husband and wife had passed the last farm in the valley, and were walking up a rough climbing path towards Sour Milk Ghyll, and Easedale Tarn. The stream was full, and its many channels ran white and foaming down the steep rock face, where it makes its chief leap to the valley. The summer weather held, and every tree and fell-side stood bathed in a warm haze, suffused with the declining light. All round, encircling fells in a purple shadow; to the north and east, great slopes appearing—Helvellyn, Grisedale, Fairfield. They walked hand in hand where the path admitted—almost silent—passionately conscious of each other—and of the beauty round them. Sometimes they stopped to gather a flower, or notice a bird; and then there would be a few words, with a meaning only for themselves. And when they reached the tarn,—a magical shadowed mirror of brown and purple water,—they sat for long beside it, while the evening faded, and a breathless quiet came across the hills, stilling all their voices, even, one might have fancied, the voice of the hurrying stream itself. At the back of Nelly's mind there was always the same inexorable counting

of the hours; and in his a profound and sometimes remorseful pity for this gentle creature who had given herself to him, together with an immense gratitude.

The stars came out, and a light easterly wind sprang up, sending ripples across the tarn, and stirring last year's leaves among the new grass. It had grown chilly, and Sarratt took Nelly's blue cloak from his arm and wrapped her in it—then in his arms, as she rested against him. Presently he felt her hand drop languidly from his, and he knew that—not the walk, but the rush of those half-spoken thoughts which held them both, had brought exhaustion.

'Darling—we must go home!' He bent over her.

She rose feebly.

'Why am I so tired? It's absurd.'

'Let me carry you a little.'

'You couldn't!' She smiled at him.

But he lifted her with ease—she was so small and slight, while in him a fresh wave of youth and strength had risen, with happiness, and the reaction of convalescence. She made no resistance, and he carried her down some way, through the broad mingled light. Her face was hidden on his breast, and felt the beating of his life. She said to herself more than once that to die so would be bliss. The marvel of love bewildered her. 'What was I like before it?—what shall I be, when he is gone?'

When she made him set her down, she said gaily that she was all right, and gave him a kiss of thanks, simply, like a child. The valley lay before them with its scattered lights, and they pressed on through the twilight—two dim and spectral figures—spirits it seemed, who had been on the heights sharing ambrosial feasts with the Immortals, and had but just descended to the common earth again.

Nelly spent the next three days, outside their walks and boatings on the lake, in whatever wifely offices to her man still remained to her—marking his new socks and khaki shirts, furnishing a small medicine chest, and packing a tin of special delicacies, meat lozenges, chocolate, various much advertised food tabloids, and his favourite biscuits. Sarratt laughed over them, but had not the heart to dissuade her. She grew paler every day, but was always gay and smiling so long as his eyes were on her; and his sound young sleep knew nothing of her quiet stifled weeping at those moments of the night, when the bodily and nervous forces are at their lowest, and all the future blackens. Miss Martin paid them several visits, bringing them books and flowers. Books and flowers too arrived from Carton—with a lavish supply of cigarettes for the departing soldier. Nelly had the piteous sense that everyone was sorry for her—Mrs. Weston, the kind landlady, Milly, the little housemaid. It seemed to her sometimes that the mere strangers she met in the road knew that

George was going, and looked at her compassionately.

The last day came, showery in the morning, and clearing to a glorious evening, with all the new leaf and growing hayfields freshened by rain, and all the streams brimming. Bridget came over in the afternoon, and as she watched her sister's face, became almost kind, almost sympathetic. George proposed to walk back part of the way to Ambleside with his sister-in-law, and Nelly with a little frown of alarm watched them go.

But the tête-à-tête was not disagreeable to either. Bridget was taken aback, to begin with, by some very liberal proposals of Sarratt's on the subject of her and Nelly's joint expenses during his absence. She was to be Nelly's guest—they both wished it—and he said kindly that he quite understood Nelly's marriage had made a difference to her, and he hoped she would let them make it up to her, as far and as soon as they could. Bridget was surprised into amiability,—and Sarratt found a chance of saying—

'And you'll let Nelly talk about the war—though it does bore you? She won't be able to help it—poor child!'

Bridget supposed that now she too would have to talk about the war. He needn't be afraid, she added drily. She would look after Nelly. And she looked so masterful and vigorous as she said it, that Sarratt could only believe her.

They shook hands in the road, better friends to all seeming than they had been yet. And Nelly received George's account of the conversation with a sigh of relief.

That night the midsummer moon would be at the full, and as the clouds vanished from the sky, and the soft purple night came down, Nelly and Sarratt leaving every piece of luggage behind them, packed, labelled, locked, and piled in the hall, ready for the cart that was to call for it in the early hours—took their way to the lake and the boathouse. They had been out at night once before, but this was to be the crowning last thing—the last joint memory.

It was eleven o'clock before the oars dipped into the water, and as they neared the larger island, the moon, rearing its bright head over the eastern fells, shot a silver pathway through the lake; and on either side of the pathway, the mirrored woods and crags, more dim and ghostly than by day, seemed to lead downward to that very threshold and entrance of the underworld, through which the blinded Theban king vanished from the eyes of men. Silver-bright the woods and fell-side, on the west; while on the east the woods in shadow, lay sleeping, 'moon-charmed.' The air was balmy; and one seemed to hear through it the steady soft beat of the summer life, rising through the leaves and grass and flowers. Every sound was enchantment—the drip of water from the

oars, the hooting of an owl on the island, even the occasional distant voices, and tapping of horses' feet on the main road bordering the lake.

Sarratt let the oars drift, and the boat glided, as though of its own will, past the island, and into the shadow beyond it. Now it was Silver How, and all the Grasmere mountains, that caught the 'hallowing' light.

Nelly sat bare-headed, her elbows on her knees, and her face propped in her hands. She was in white, with a white shawl round her, and the grace of the slight form and dark head stirred anew in Sarratt that astonished and exquisite sense of possession which had been one of the main elements of consciousness, during their honeymoon. Of late indeed it had been increasingly met and wrestled with by something harsher and sterner; by the instinct of the soldier, of the fighting man, foreseeing a danger to his own will, a weakening of the fibre on which his effort and his power depend. There were moments when passionately as he loved her, he was glad to be going; secretly glad that the days which were in truth a greater test of endurance than the trenches were coming to an end. He must be able to trust himself and his own nerve to the utmost. Away from her, love would be only a strengthening power; here beside her, soul and sense contended.

A low voice came out of the shadow.

'George—I'm not going with you to the station.'

'Best not, dearest—much best.'

A silence. Then the voice spoke again.

'How long will it take you, George, getting to the front?'

'About twenty-four hours from the base, perhaps more. It's a weary business.'

'Will you be in action at once?'

'I think so. That part of the line's very short of men.'

'When shall I hear?'

He laughed.

'By every possible post, I should think, darling. You've given me post-cards enough.'

And he tapped his breast-pocket, where lay the little writing-case she had furnished for every imaginable need.

'George!'

'Yes, darling.'

'When you're tired, you're—you're not to write.'

He put out his long arms, and took her hands in his.

'I shan't be tired—and I shall write.'

She looked down upon the hands holding hers. In each of the little fingers there was a small amusing deformity—a slight crook or twist—which, as is the way of lovers, was especially dear to her. She remembered once, before they were engaged, flaming out at Bridget, who had made mock of it. She stooped now, and kissed the fingers. Then she bowed her forehead upon them.

'George!'—he could only just hear her—'I know Miss Martin will be kind to me—and I shall find plenty to do. You're never to worry about me.'

'I won't—so long as you write to me—every day.'

There was again a silence. Then she lifted her head, and as the boat swung out of the shadow, the moonlight caught her face.

'You'll take that Wordsworth I gave you, won't you, George? It'll remind you—of this.' Her gesture showed the lake and the mountains.

'Of course, I shall take it. I shall read it whenever I can—perhaps more for your sake—than Wordsworth's.'

'It'll make us remember the same things,' she murmured.

'As if we wanted anything to make us remember!'

'George!' her voice was almost a sob—'It's been almost too perfect. Sometimes—just for that—I'm afraid.'

'Don't be, darling. The God we believe in *isn't* a jealous God! That's one of the notions one grows out of—over there.'

'Do you think He's our friend, George—that He really cares?'

The sweet appealing voice touched him unbearably.

'Yes, I do think it—' he said, firmly, after a pause. 'I do believe it—with all my heart.'

'Then I'll believe it!' she said, with a long breath;

and there was silence again, till suddenly over the water came the sound of the Rydal Chapel bell, striking midnight. Nelly withdrew her hands and sat up.

'George, we must go home. You must have a good night.'

He obeyed her, took up the oars, and pulled swiftly to the boathouse. She sat in a kind of dream. It was all over, the heavenly time—all done. She had had the very best of life—could it ever come again? In her pain and her longing she was strangely conscious of growth and change. The Nelly of three weeks back seemed to have nothing to do with her present self, to be another human being altogether.

He made her go to bed, and remained in the sitting-room himself, under pretence of some papers he must put in order. When the sounds in the next room ceased, and he knew that she must be lying still, waiting for him, he sat down, took pen and paper, and began to write to her—a letter to be given to her if he fell. He had already written a letter of business directions, which was at his lawyer's. This was of another kind.

'My Darling,—this will be very short. It is only to tell you that if I fall—if we never meet again, after to-morrow, you are to think first of all —and always—that you have made a man so happy that if no more joy can come to him on earth, he could die now—as far as he himself is concerned—

blessing God for his life. I never imagined that love could be so perfect. You have taught me. God reward you—God watch over you. If I die, you will be very sad—that will be the bitterness to me, if I have time to know it. But this is my last prayer to you—to be comforted by this remembrance—of what you have done for me—what you have been to me. And in time, my precious one, comfort will come. There may be a child—if so, you will love it for us both. But if not, you must still take comfort. You must be willing, for my sake, to be comforted. And remember:—don't be angry with me, darling—if in years to come, another true love, and another home should be offered you, don't refuse them—Nelly! You were born to be loved. And if my spirit lives, and understands, what could it feel but joy that your sorrow was healed—my best beloved!

'This will be given to you only if I die. With the deepest gratitude and the tenderest love that a man can feel, I bid you good-bye—my precious wife—good-bye!'

He put it up with a steady hand, and addressed it first to Nelly, enclosing it in a larger envelope addressed to his oldest friend, a school-fellow, who had been his best man at their marriage. Then he stole downstairs, unlocked the front door, and crossing the road in the moonlight, he put the letter into the wall post-box on the further side. And before re-entering the house, he stood a minute or two in the road, let-

ting the fresh wind from the fells beat upon his face, and trying the while to stamp on memory the little white house where Nelly lay, the trees overhanging it, the mountain tops beyond the garden wall. . . .

CHAPTER V

'IS Mrs. Sarratt in?' asked Miss Martin of Mrs. Weston's little maid, Milly.

Milly wore a look of animation, as of one who has been finding the world interesting.

'She's gone a walk—over the bridge, Miss.'

'Has she had news of Mr. Sarratt?'

'Yes, Miss,' said the girl eagerly. 'He's all right. Mrs. Sarratt got a telegram just a couple of hours ago.'

'And you think I shall find her by the lake?'

Milly thought so. Then advancing a step, she said confidentially—

'She's been dreadfully upset this two days, Miss. Not that she'd say anything. But she's looked——'

'I know. I saw her yesterday.'

'And it's been a job to get her to eat anything. Mrs. Weston's been after her with lots of things—tasty you know, Miss—to try and tempt her. But she wouldn't hardly look at them.'

'Thank you, Milly'—said Miss Martin, after a pause. 'Well, I'll find her. Is Miss Cookson here?'

Milly's candid countenance changed at once. She frowned—it might have been said she scowled.

'She came the day Mr. Sarratt went away, Miss. Well of course it's not my place to speak, Miss—

but *she* don't do Mrs. Sarratt no good!' Miss Martin couldn't help a smile—but she shook her head reprovingly all the same, as she hastened away. Milly had been in her Sunday-school class, and they were excellent friends.

Across the Rotha, she pursued a little footpath leading to the lakeside. It was a cold day, with flying clouds and gleams on hill and water. The bosom of Silver How held depths of purple shadow, but there were lights like elves at play, chasing each other along the Easedale fells, and the stony side of Nab Scar.

Beside the water, on a rock, sat Nelly Sarratt. An open telegram and a bundle of letters lay on her lap, her hands loosely folded over them. She was staring at the water and the hills, with absent eyes, and her small face wore an expression—relaxed and sweet—like that of a comforted child, which touched Miss Martin profoundly.

'So you've heard?—you poor thing!' said the elder woman smiling, as she laid a friendly hand on the girl's shoulder.

Nelly looked up—and drew a long deep breath.

'He's all right, and the battalion's going to have three weeks' rest—behind the lines.'

Her dark eyes shone. Hester Martin sat down on the turf beside her.

'Capital! When did you hear last?'

'Just the day before the "push." Of course he

couldn't tell me anything—but somehow I knew. And then the papers since—they're pretty ghastly,' said Nelly, with a faint laugh and a shiver. 'The farm under the hill there'—she pointed—'you know about them?'

'Yes. I saw them after the telegram,' said Miss Martin, sadly. 'Of course it was the only son. These small families are too awful. Every married woman ought to have six sons!'

Nelly dropped her face out of sight, shading it with her hands. Presently she said, in a dreamy voice of content—

'I shall get a letter to-morrow.'

'How do you know?'

Nelly held out the telegram, which said—

'All safe. Posted letter last night. Love.'

'It *can't* take more than forty-eight hours to come—can it?' Then she lifted her eyes again to the distant farm, with its white front and its dark patch of yews.

'I keep thinking of *their* telegram—' she said, slowly—'and then of mine. Oh, this war is too *horrible!*' She threw up her hands with a sudden wild gesture, and then let one of them drop into Hester Martin's grasp. 'In George's last letter he told me he had to go with a message across a bit of ground that was being shelled. He went with a telephonist. He crossed first. The other man was to wait and follow him after an interval. George got across, then the man with the telephone wire started,

and was shot—just as he reached George. He fell into George's arms—and died. And it might have been George—it might have been George just as well! It might be George any day!'

Miss Martin looked at her in perplexity. She had no ready-made consolations—she never had. Perhaps it was that which made her kind wrinkled face such a welcome sight to those in trouble. But at last she said—

'It is all we women can do—to be patient—and hope—not to let our courage go down.'

Nelly shook her head.

'I am always saying that to myself—but! when the news comes—*if* it comes—what good will that be to me! Oh, I haven't been idle—indeed I haven't,' she added piteously—'I've worked myself tired every day—just not to think!'

'I know you have,' Miss Martin pressed the hand in hers. 'Well, now, he'll be all safe for a fortnight——'

'Perhaps three weeks,' Nelly corrected her, eagerly. Then she looked round at her new friend, a shy smile lighting up her face, and bringing back its bloom.

'You know he writes to me nearly every day?'

'It's the way people have—war or no war—when they're in love,' said Hester Martin drily. 'And you—how often?'

'*Every* day. I haven't missed once. How could I?—when he wants me to write—when I hear so

often!' And her free hand closed possessively, greedily, over the letters in her lap.

Hester Martin surveyed her thoughtfully.

'I wouldn't do war-work all day, if I were you,' she said at last. 'Why don't you go on with your sketching?'

'I was going to try this very afternoon. Sir William said he would give me a lesson,' was the listless reply.

'He's coming here?'

'He said he would be walking this way, if it was fine,' said Nelly, indifferently.

Both relapsed into silence. Then Miss Martin enquired after Bridget. The face beside her darkened a little.

'She's very well. She knows about the telegram. She thought I was a great goose to be so anxious. She's making an index now—for the book!'

'The psychology book?'

'Yes!' A pause—then Nelly looked round, flushing.

'I can't talk to Bridget you see—about George—or the war. She just thinks the world's mad—that it's six to one and half a dozen to the other—that it doesn't matter at all who wins—so long of course as the Germans don't come here. And as for me, if I was so foolish as to marry a soldier in the middle of the war, why I must just take the consequences—grin and bear it!'

Her tone and look showed that in her clinging

way she had begun to claim the woman beside her as a special friend, while Hester Martin's manner towards her bore witness that the claim excited a warm response—that intimacy and affection had advanced rapidly since George Sarratt's departure.

'Why do you put up with it?' said Miss Martin, sharply. 'Couldn't you get some cousin—some friend to stay with you?'

Nelly shook her head. 'George wanted me to. But I told him I couldn't. It would mean a quarrel. I could never quarrel with Bridget.'

Miss Martin laughed indignantly. 'Why not—if she makes you miserable?'

'I don't know. I suppose I'm afraid of her. And besides'—the words came reluctantly—'she does a lot for me. I *ought* to be very grateful!'

Yes, Hester Martin did know that, in a sense, Bridget did 'a lot' for her younger sisters. It was not many weeks since she had made their acquaintance, but there had been time for her to see how curiously dependent young Mrs. Sarratt was on Miss Cookson. There was no real sympathy between them; nor could Miss Martin believe that there was ever much sense of kinship. But whenever there was anything to be done involving any friction with the outside world, Bridget was ready to do it, while Nelly invariably shrank from it.

For instance, some rather troublesome legal business connected with Nelly's marriage, and the reinvestment of a small sum of money, had descended

on the young wife almost immediately after George's departure. She could hardly bring herself to look at the letter. What did it matter? Let their trustee settle it. To be worrying about it seemed to be somehow taking her mind from George—to be breaking in on that imaginative vision of him, and his life in the trenches, which while it tortured her, yet filled the blank of his absence. So Bridget did it all—corresponded peremptorily with their rather old and incompetent trustee, got all the signatures necessary out of Nelly, and carried the thing through. Again, on another and smaller occasion, Miss Martin had seen the two sisters confronted with a scandalous overcharge for the carriage of some heavy luggage from Manchester. Nelly was aghast; but she would have paid the sum demanded like a lamb, if Bridget had not stepped in—grappled with carter and railway company, while Nelly looked on, helpless but relieved.

It was clear that Nelly's inborn wish to be liked, her quivering responsiveness, together with a strong dose of natural indolence, made her hate disagreement or friction of any kind. She was always yielding—always ready to give in. But when Bridget in her harsh aggravating way fought things out and won, Nelly was indeed often made miserable, by the *ricochet* of the wrath roused by Bridget's methods upon herself; but she generally ended, all the same, by realising that Bridget had done her a service which she could not have done for herself.

Hester Martin frankly thought the sister odious, and pitied the bride for having to live with her. All the same she often found herself wondering how Nelly would ever manage the practical business of life alone, supposing loneliness fell to her at any time. But why should it fall to her?—unless indeed Sarratt were killed in action. If he survived the war he would make her the best of guides and husbands; she would have children; and her sweetness, her sensitiveness would stiffen under the impact of life to a serviceable toughness. But meanwhile what could she do—poor little Ariadne!—but 'live and be lovely'—sew and knit, and gather sphagnum moss—dreaming half her time, and no doubt crying half the night. What dark circles already round the beautiful eyes! And how transparent were the girl's delicate hands! Miss Martin felt that she was watching a creature on whom love had been acting with a concentrated and stimulating energy, bringing the whole being suddenly and rapidly into flower. And now, what had been only stimulus and warmth had become strain, and, sometimes, anguish, or fear. The poor drooping plant could with difficulty maintain itself.

For the moment however, Nelly, in her vast relief, was ready to talk and think of quite ordinary matters.

'Bridget is in a good temper with me to-day!' she said presently, looking with a smile at her companion—'because—since the telegram came—I told

her I would accept Miss Farrell's invitation to go and spend a Sunday with them.'

'Well, it might distract you. But you needn't expect to get much out of Cicely!'

The old face lit up with its tolerant, half-sarcastic smile.

'I shall be dreadfully afraid of her!' said Nelly.

'No need to be. William will keep her in order. She is a foolish woman, Cicely, and her own worst enemy, but—somehow'—The speaker paused. She was about to say—'somehow I am fond of her'—when she suddenly wondered whether the remark would be true, and stopped herself.

'I think she's very—very good-looking'—said Nelly, heartily. 'Only, why'—she hesitated, but her half-laughing look continued the sentence.

'Why does she blacken her eyebrows, and paint her lips, and powder her cheeks? Is that what you mean?'

Nelly's look was apologetic. 'She doesn't really want it, does she?' she said shyly, as though remembering that she was speaking to a kinswoman of the person discussed. 'She could do so well without it.'

'No—to be quite candid, I don't think she *would* look so well without it. That's the worst of it. It seems to suit her to be made up!—though everybody knows it *is* make-up.'

'Of course, if George wanted me to "make up," I should do it at once,' said Nelly, thoughtfully, propping her chin on her hands, and staring at the

lake. 'But he hates it. Is—is Miss Farrell—' she looked round—'in love with anybody?'

Miss Martin laughed.

'I'll leave you to find out—when you go there. So if your husband liked you to paint and powder, you would do it?'

The older woman looked curiously at her companion. As she sat there, on a rock above the lake, in a grey nurse's dress with a nurse's bonnet tied under her chin, Hester Martin conveyed an impression of rugged and unconscious strength which seemed to fuse her with the crag behind her. She had been gathering sphagnum moss on the fells almost from sunrise that morning; and by tea-time she was expecting a dozen munition-workers from Barrow, whom she was to house, feed and 'do for,' in her little cottage over the week-end. In the interval, she had climbed the steep path to that white farm where death had just entered, and having mourned with them that mourn, she had come now, as naturally, to rejoice with Nelly Sarratt.

Nelly considered her question, but not in any doubtfulness of mind.

'Indeed, I would,' she said, decidedly. 'Isn't it my duty to make George happy?'

'What "George"? If Mr. Sarratt wanted you to paint and powder——'

'He wouldn't be the "George" I married? There's something in that!' laughed Nelly. Then she lifted her hand to shade her eyes against the

westering sun—'Isn't that Sir William coming?'

She pointed doubtfully to a distant figure walking along the path that skirts the western edge of the lake. Miss Martin put up her glasses.

'Certainly. Coming no doubt to give you a lesson. But where are your sketching things?'

Nelly rose in a hurry.

'I forgot about them when I came out. The telegram——' She pressed her hands to her eyes, with a long breath.

'I'll run back for them. Will you tell him?'

She departed, and Hester awaited her cousin. He came slowly along the lake, his slight lameness just visible in his gait—otherwise a splendid figure of a man, with a bare head, bearded and curled, like a Viking in a drawing by William Morris. He carried various artist's gear slung about him, and an alpenstock. His thoughts were apparently busy, for he came within a few yards of Hester Martin, before he saw her.

'Hullo! Hester—you here? I came to get some news of Mrs. Sarratt and her husband. Is he all right?'

Hester repeated the telegram, and added the information that seeing him coming, Mrs. Sarratt had gone in search of her sketching things.

'Ah!—I thought if she'd got good news she might like to begin,' said Farrell. 'Poor thing—she's lucky! Our casualties these last few days have been awful, and the gain very small. Men or guns—

that's our choice just now. And it will be months before we get the guns. So practically, there's no choice. Somebody ought to be hung!'

He sat down frowning. But his face soon cleared, and he began to study the point of view.

'Nothing to be made of it but a picture post-card,' he declared. 'However I daresay she'll want to try it. They always do—the beginners. The more ambitious and impossible the thing, the better.'

'Why don't you *teach* her?' said Hester, severely.

Farrell laughed.

'Why I only want to amuse her, poor little soul!' he said, as he put his easel together. 'Why should she take it seriously?'

'She's more intelligence than you think.'

'Has she? What a pity! There are so many intelligent people in the world, and so few pretty ones.'

He spoke with a flippant self-confidence that annoyed his cousin. But she knew very well that she was poorly off in the gifts that were required to scourge him. And there already was the light form of Nelly, on the footbridge over the river. Farrell looked up and saw her coming.

'Extraordinary—the grace of the little thing!' he said, half to himself, half to Hester. 'And she knows nothing about it—or seems to.'

'Do you imagine that her husband hasn't told her?' Hester's tone was mocking.

Farrell looked up in wonder.

'Sarratt? of course he has—so far as he has eyes to see it. But he has no idea how remarkable it is.'

'What? His wife's beauty? Nonsense!'

'How could he? It wants a trained eye,' said Farrell, quite serious. 'Hush!—here she comes.'

Nelly came up breathlessly, laden with her own paraphernalia. Farrell at once perceived that she was pale and hollow-eyed. But her expression was radiant.

'How kind of you to come!' she said, looking up at him. 'You know I've had good news—splendid news?'

'I do indeed. I came to ask,' he said gravely. 'He's out of it for a bit?'

'Yes, for three weeks!'

'So you can take a rest from worrying?'

She nodded brightly, but she was not yet quite mistress of her nerves, and her face quivered. He turned away, and began to set his palette, while she seated herself.

Hester watched the lesson for half an hour, till it was time to go and make ready for her munition-workers. And she watched it with increasing pleasure, and increasing scorn of a certain recurrent uneasiness she had not been able to get rid of. Nothing could have been better than Farrell's manner to Ariadne. It was friendly, chivalrous, respectful—all it should be—with a note of protection, of unspoken sympathy, which, coming from a man nearly twenty years older than the little lady herself, was

both natural and attractive. He made an excellent teacher besides, handling her efforts with a mixture of criticism and praise, which presently roused Nelly's ambition, and kindled her cheeks and eyes. Time flew and when Hester Martin rose to leave them, Nelly cried out in protest—'It can't be five o'clock!'

'A quarter to—just time to get home before my girls arrive!'

'Oh, and I must go too,' said Nelly regretfully. 'I promised Bridget I would be in for tea. But I *was* getting on—wasn't I?' She turned to Farrell.

'Swimmingly. But you've only just begun. Next time the sitting must be longer.'

'Will you—will you come in to tea?'—she asked him shyly. 'My sister would be very glad.'

'Many thanks—but I am afraid I can't. I shall be motoring back to Carton to-night. To-morrow is one of my hospital days. I told you how I divided my week, and salved my conscience.'

He smiled down upon her from his great height, his reddish gold hair and beard blown by the wind, and she seemed to realise him as a great, manly, favouring presence, who made her feel at ease.

Hester Martin had already vanished over the bridge, and Farrell and Nelly strolled back more leisurely towards the lodgings, he carrying her canvas sketching bag.

On the way she conveyed to him her own and Bridget's acceptance of the Carton invitation.

'If Miss Farrell won't mind our clothes—or rather our lack of them! I did mean to have my wedding dress altered into an evening dress—but!——'

She lifted her hand and let it fall, in a sad significant gesture which pleased his fastidious eye.

'You hadn't even the time of the heart for it? I should think not!' he said warmly. 'Who cares about dress nowadays?'

'Your sister!' thought Nelly—but aloud she said—

'Well then we'll come—we'll be delighted to come. May I see the hospital?'

'Of course. It's like any other hospital.'

'Is it very full now?' she asked him uneasily, her bright look clouding.

'Yes—but it ebbs and flows. Sometimes for a day or two all our men depart. Then there is a great rush.'

'Are they bad cases?'

There was an unwilling insistence in her voice, as though her mind dealt with images it would gladly have put away, but could not.

'A good many of them. They send them us as straight as they can from the front. But the surgeons are wonderfully skilful. It's simply marvelous what they can do.'

He seemed to see a shiver pass through her slight shoulders, and he changed the subject at once. The Carton motor should come for her and her sister, he

said, whenever they liked, the following Saturday afternoon. The run would take about an hour. Meanwhile—

'Do you want any more books or magazines?' he asked her smiling, with the look of one only eager to be told how to serve her. They had paused in the road outside the lodgings.

'Oh! how could we! You sent us such a bundle!' cried Nelly gratefully. 'We are always finding something new in it. It makes the evenings so different. We will bring them back when we come.'

'Don't hurry. And go on with the drawing. I shall expect to see it a great deal further on next time. It's all right so far.'

He went his way back, speedily, taking a short cut over Loughrigg to his cottage. His thoughts, as he climbed, were very full of Mrs. Sarratt. But they were the thoughts of an artist—of a man who had studied beauty, and the European tradition of beauty, whether in form or landscape, for many years; who had worked—*à contre cœur*—in a Paris studio, and had copied Tintoret—fervently—in Venice; who had been a collector of most things, from Tanagra figures to Della Robbias. She made an impression upon him in her lightness and grace, her small proportions, her lissomness of outline, very like that of a Tanagra figure. How had she come to spring from Manchester? What kindred had she with the smoke and grime of a great business city? He fell into amused speculation. Manchester

has always possessed colonies of Greek merchants. Somewhere in the past was there some strain of southern blood which might account for her? He remembered a beautiful Greek girl at an Oxford Commemoration, when he had last attended that function; the daughter of a Greek financier settled in London, whose still lovely mother had been drawn and painted interminably by the Burne Jones and William Morris group of artists. *She* was on a larger scale than Mrs. Sarratt, but the colour of the flesh was the same—as though light shone through alabaster—and the sweetness of the deep-set eyes. Moreover she had produced much the same effect on the bystander, as of a child of nature, a creature of impulse and passion—passion, clinging and self-devoted, not fierce and possessive—through all the more superficial suggestions of reticence and self-control. 'This little creature is only at the beginning of her life'—he thought, with a kind of pity for her very softness and exquisiteness. 'What the deuce will she have made of it, by the end? Why should such beings grow old?'

His interest in her led him gradually to other thoughts—partly disagreeable, partly philosophical. He had once—and only once—found himself involved in a serious love-affair, which, as it had left him a bachelor, had clearly come to no good. It was with a woman much older than himself—gifted—more or less famous—a kind of modern Corinne whom he had met for a month in Rome in his first

youth. Corinne had laid siege to him, and he had eagerly, whole-heartedly succumbed. He saw himself, looking back, as the typically befooled and bamboozled mortal; for Corinne, in the end, had thrown him over for a German professor, who admired her books and had a villa on the Janiculum. During the eighteen years which had elapsed since their adventure, he had quite made it up with her, and had often called at the Janiculan villa, with its antiques, its window to the view, and the great Judas tree between it and Rome. His sense of escape—which grew upon him—was always tempered by a keen respect for the lady's disinterestedness, and those high ideals which must have led her—for what else could?—to prefer the German professor, who had so soon become decrepit, to himself. But the result of it all had been that the period of highest susceptibility and effervescence had passed by, leaving him still unmarried. Since then he had had many women-friends, following harmlessly a score of 'chance desires'! But he had never wanted to marry anybody; and the idea of surrendering the solitude and independence of his pleasant existence had now become distasteful to him. Renan in some late book speaks of his life as 'cette charmante promenade à travers la realité.' Farrell could have adopted much the same words about his own—until the war. The war had made him think a good deal, like Sarratt; though the thoughts of a much travelled, epicurean man of the world were naturally very dif-

ferent from those of the young soldier. At least 'the surge and thunder' of the struggle had developed in Farrell a new sensitiveness, a new unrest, as though youth had returned upon him. The easy, drifting days of life before the catastrophe were gone. The 'promenade' was no longer charming. But the jagged and broken landscape through which it was now taking him, held him often—like so many others—breathless with strange awes, strange questionings. And all the more, because, owing to his physical infirmity, he must be perforce a watcher, a discontented watcher, rather than an actor, in the great scene.

That night Nelly, sitting at her open window, with starlight on the lake, and the cluster rose sending its heavy scent into the room—wrote to her husband.

'My darling—it is just a little more than eight hours since I got your telegram. Sometimes it seems like nothing—and then like *days*—days of happiness. I was *very* anxious. But I know I oughtn't to write about that. You say it helps you if I keep cheerful, and always expect the best and not the worst. Indeed, George, I do keep cheerful. Ask Miss Martin—ask Bridget——'

At this point two splashes fell, luckily not on the letter, but on the blotting paper beside it, and Nelly hastily lifted her handkerchief to dry a pair of swimming eyes.

'But he can't see—he won't know!' she thought,

apologising to herself; yet wrestling at the same time with the sharp temptation to tell him exactly how she had suffered, that he might comfort her. But she repelled it. Her moral sense told her that she ought to be sustaining and strengthening him—rather than be hanging upon him the burden of her own fears and agonies.

She went on bravely—

'Of course, after the news in the paper this morning,—and yesterday—I was worried till I heard. I knew—at any rate I guessed—you must have been in it all. And now you are safe, my own own!—for three whole blessed weeks. Oh, how well I shall sleep all that time—and how much work I shall do! But it won't be all war-work. Sir William Farrell came over to-day, and showed me how to begin a drawing of the lake. I shall finish it for your birthday, darling. Of course you won't want to be bothered with it out there. I shall keep it till you come. The lake is so beautiful to-night, George. It is warmer again, and the stars are all out. The mountains are so blue and quiet—the water so still. But for the owls, everything seems asleep. But they call and call—and the echo goes round the lake. I can just see the island, and the rocks round which the boat drifted—that last night. How good you were to me—how I loved to sit and look at you, with the light on your dear face—and the oars hanging—and the shining water——

'And then I think of where you are—and what

you have been seeing in that awful fighting. But not for long. I try to put it away.

'George, darling!—you know what you said when you went away—what you hoped might come—to make us both happy—and take my thoughts off the war? But, dear, it isn't so—you mustn't hope it. I shall be dreadfully sorry if you are disappointed. But you'll only find *me*—your own Nelly—not changed a bit—when you come back.

'I want to hear everything when you write—how your men did—whether you took any prisoners, whether there was ammunition enough, or whether you were short again? I feel every day that I ought to go and make munitions—but somehow—I can't. We are going to Carton on Saturday. Bridget is extremely pleased. I rather dread it. But I shall be able to write you a long letter about it on Sunday morning, instead of going to church. There is Rydal chapel striking twelve! My darling—my darling!—good-night.'

CHAPTER VI

THE following Saturday afternoon, at three o'clock, the Carton motor duly arrived at the Rydal cottage door. It was a hot summer day, the mountains colourless and small under their haze of heat, the woods darkening already towards the August monotony, the streams low and shrunken. Lakeland was at the moment when the artists who haunt her would rather not paint her, remembering the subtleties of spring, and looking forward to the pageantry of autumn. But for the eye that loves her she has beauties enough at any time, and no blanching heat and dust can spoil the lovely or delicate things that lie waiting in the shade of her climbing oak-woods or on her bare fells, or beside her still lakes.

Nelly took her seat in the landaulette, with Bridget beside her. Milly and Mrs. Weston admiringly watched their departure from the doorway of the lodgings, and they were soon speeding towards Grasmere and Dunmail Raise. Nelly's fresh white dress, aided by the blue coat and shady hat which George had thought so ravishing, became her well; and she was girlishly and happily aware of it. Her spirits were high, for there in the little handbag on her wrist lay George's last letter, received that morning,

short and hurried, written just to catch the post, on his arrival at the rest camp, thirty miles behind the line. Heart-ache and fear, if every now and then their black wings brushed her, and far within, a nerve quivered, were mostly quite forgotten. Youth, the joy of being loved, the joy of mere living, reclaimed her.

Bridget beside her, in a dark blue cotton, with a very fashionable hat, looked more than her thirty years, and might almost have been taken for Nelly's mother. She sat erect, her thin straight shoulders carrying her powerful head and determined face; and she noticed many things that quite escaped her sister: the luxury of the motor for instance; the details of the Farrell livery worn by the two discharged soldiers who sat in front as chauffeur and footman; and the evident fact that while small folk must go without servants, the rich seemed to have no difficulty in getting as many as they wanted.

'I wonder what this motor cost?' she said presently in a speculative tone, as they sped past the turn to Grasmere church and began to ascend the pass leading to Keswick.

'Well, we know—about—don't we?' said Nelly vaguely. And she guessed a sum, at which Bridget looked contemptuous.

'More than *that,* my dear! However of course it doesn't matter to them.'

'Don't you think people look at us sometimes, as though we were doing something wrong?' said

Nelly uneasily. They had just passed two old labourers—fine patriarchal fellows who had paused a moment to gaze at the motor and the two ladies. 'I suppose it's because—because we look so smart.'

'Well, why shouldn't we?'

'Because it's war-time I suppose,' said Nelly slowly—'and perhaps their sons are fighting——'

'We're not fighting!'

'No—but——.' With a slight frown, Nelly tried to express herself. 'It looks as if we were just living as usual, while—Oh, you know, Bridget, what people think!—how *everybody's* trying not to spend money on themselves.'

'Are they?' Bridget laughed aloud. 'Look at all the dress advertisements in the papers. Why, yesterday, when I was having tea with those people at Windermere, there was a man there telling lots of interesting things. He said he knew some great merchants in the city, who had spent thousands and thousands on furs—expensive furs—the summer before the war. And they thought they'd all have been left on their hands, that they'd have lost heavily. And instead of that they sold them all, and made a real big profit!'

Bridget turned an almost triumphant look on her sister, as though the *coup* described had been her own.

'Well, it isn't right!' said Nelly, passionately. 'It isn't—it *isn't*—Bridget! When the war's costing so much—and people are suffering and dying——'

'Oh, I know!' said Bridget hastily. 'You needn't preach to me my dear child. I only wanted you to look at *facts*. You're always so incurably sentimental!'

'I'm not!' Nelly protested, helplessly. 'We *make* the facts. If nobody bought the furs, the facts would be different. George says it's wicked to squander money, and live as if everything were just the same as it used to be. And I agree with him!'

'Of course you do!' laughed Bridget. '*You* don't squander money, my dear!'

'Only because I haven't got it to spend, you mean?' said Nelly, flushing.

'No—but you should look at things sensibly. The people who are making money are spending it—oceans of it! And the people who have money, like the Farrells, are spending it too. Wait till you see how they live!'

'But there's the hospital!' cried Nelly.

Bridget shrugged her shoulders.

'That's because they can afford to give the hospital, and have the motor-cars too. If they had to choose between hospitals and motor-cars!'

'Lots of people do!'

'You think Sir William Farrell looks like doing without things?' said Bridget, provokingly. Then she checked herself. 'Of course I like Sir William very much. But then *I* don't see why he shouldn't have motor-cars or any other nice thing he wants.'

'That's because—you don't think enough—you

never think enough—about the war!' said Nelly, insistently.

Bridget's look darkened.

'I would stop the war to-morrow—I would make peace to-morrow—if I could—you know I would. It will destroy us all—ruin us all. It's sheer, stark lunacy. There, you know what I think!'

'I don't see what it's ever cost you, Bridget!' said Nelly, breathing fast.

'Oh, well, it's very easy to say that—but it isn't argument.'

Bridget's deep-set penetrating eyes glittered as she turned them on her sister. 'However, for goodness' sake, don't let's quarrel about it. It's a lovely day, and we don't often have a motor like this to drive in!'

The speaker leant back, giving herself up to the sensuous pleasure of the perfectly hung car, and the rapid movement through the summer air. Wythburn and Thirlmere were soon passed; leaving them just time to notice the wrack and ruin which Manchester has made of the once lovely shore of Thirlmere, where hideous stretches of brown mud, and the ruins of long submerged walls and dwellings, reappear with every dry summer to fling reproach in the face of the destroyer.

Now they were on the high ground above Keswick; and to the west and north rose a superb confusion of mountain-forms, peaked and rounded and cragged, with water shining among them, and the silver cloud wreaths looped and threaded through

the valleys, leaving the blue or purple tops suspended, high in air, unearthly and alone, to parley with the setting sun. Not yet setting indeed—but already flooding the west with a glory in which the further peaks had disappeared—burnt away; a shining holocaust to the Gods of Light and Fire.

Then a sharp descent, a run through Keswick, another and a tamer lake, a sinking of the mountain-forms, and they were nearing the woods of Carton. Both sisters had been silent for some time. Nelly was wrapt in thoughts of George. Would he get leave before Christmas? Suppose he were wounded slightly—just a wound that would send him home, and let her nurse him?—a wound from which he would be sure to get well—not too quickly! She could not make up her mind to wish it—to pray for it—it seemed like tempting Providence. But how she had envied a young couple whom she sometimes met walking on the Ambleside road!—a young private of one of the Border regiments, with a bandaged arm, and his sweetheart. Once—with that new freemasonry which the war has brought about, she had stopped to speak to them. The boy had been quite ready to talk about his wound. It had seemed nothing at first—just a fragment of shrapnel—he had scarcely known he was hit. But abscess after abscess had formed—a leading nerve had been injured—it might be months before he could use it again. And meanwhile the plain but bright-faced girl beside him was watching over him; he lodged with her parents

as his own were dead; and they were to be married soon. No chance of his going out again! The girl's father would give him work in his garage. They had the air of persons escaped from shipwreck and ashamed almost of their own secret happiness, while others were still battling with and sinking in the waves.

A flowery lodge, a long drive through green stretches of park, with a heather fell for background —and then the motor, leaving to one side a huge domed pile with the Union Jack floating above it, ran through a wood, and drew up in front of Carton Cottage, a low building on the steps of which stood Sir William Farrell.

'Delighted to see you! Come in, and let Cicely give you some tea. They'll see to your luggage!'

He led in Nelly, and Bridget followed, glancing from side to side, with an eye shrewdly eager, an eye that took in and appraised all it saw. A cottage indeed! It had been built by Sir William's father, for his only sister, a maiden lady, to whom he was much attached. 'Aunt Sophy' had insisted on a house to herself, being a person of some ruggedness and eccentricity of character and averse to any sort of dependence on other people's ways and habits. But she had allowed her brother to build and furnish the cottage for her as lavishly as he pleased, and during his long widowhood she had been of much

help to him in the management of the huge household at Carton Hall, and in the bringing up of his two children. After her death, the house had remained empty for some time, till, six months after the outbreak of war, Farrell had handed over the Hall to the War Office, and he and his sister had migrated to the smaller house.

Bridget was aware, as she followed her sister, of rooms small but numerous opening out on many sides, of long corridors with glistening teak floors, of windows open to a garden ablaze with roses. Sir William led them to what seemed a buzz of voices, and opened a door.

Cicely Farrell rose languidly from a table surrounded by laughing young men, and advanced to meet the newcomers. Nelly found herself shaking hands with the Captain Marsworth she had seen at Loughrigg Tarn, and being introduced by Sir William to various young officers, some in khaki, visitants from a neighbouring camp, and some from the Hall, in various forms of convalescent undress, grey flannel suits, khaki tunics with flannel 'slacks,' or full khaki, as the wearers pleased. The little lady in white had drawn all the male eyes upon her as she came in, and those who rapidly resumed their talk with Miss Farrell or each other, interrupted by the entrance of the newcomers, were no less aware of her than those who, with Farrell, devoted themselves to supply the two sisters with tea.

Nelly herself, extremely shy, but sustained some-

how by the thought that she must hold her own in this new world, was soon deep in conversation with a charming youth, who owned a long, slightly lantern-jawed face and fair hair, moved on crutches with a slung knee, and took everything including his wound as 'funny.'

'Where is your husband?' he asked her. 'Sir William thinks he is somewhere near Festubert? My hat, the Lanchesters have been having a hot time there!—funny, isn't it? But they'll be moved to an easier job soon. They're always in luck—the Lanchesters—funny, I call it?—what? I wouldn't worry if I were you. Your husband's got through this all right—mightn't have another such show for ages. These things are awful chancey—funny, isn't it? Oh, my wound?—well, it was just when I was getting over the parados to move back to billets—that the brute got me. Funny, wasn't it? Hullo!—here's a swell! My hat!—it's General Torr!'

Nelly looked up bewildered to see a group of officers enter the room, headed by a magnificent soldier, with light brown hair, handsome features, and a broad be-ribboned chest. Miss Farrell greeted him and his comrades with her best smiles; and Nelly observed her closely, as she stood laughing and talking among them. Sir William's sister was in uniform, if it could be called a uniform. She wore a nurse's cap and apron over a pale blue dress of some soft crapey material. The cap was a square of fine lawn, two corners of which were fastened under the

chin with a brooch consisting of one large pearl. The open throat showed a single string of fine pearls, and diamonds sparkled in the small ears. Edging the cap on the temples and cheeks were little curls—à la Henrietta Maria—and the apron, also of the finest possible lawn, had a delicately embroidered edge. The lips of the wearer had been artificially reddened, her eyebrows and eyelids had been skilfully pencilled, her cheeks rouged. A more extraordinary specimen of the nursing sisterhood it would have been impossible to find. Nevertheless the result was, beyond gainsaying, both amusing and picturesque. The lad beside Nelly watched Miss Farrell with a broad grin. On the other hand, a lady in a thin black dress and widow's veil, who was sitting near Bridget, turned away after a few minutes' observation of the hostess, and with a curling lip began to turn over a book lying on a table near her. But whether the onlookers admired or disapproved, there could be no question that Miss Farrell held the field.

'I am very glad to hear that Mrs. Sarratt has good news of her husband!' said Captain Marsworth courteously to Bridget, hardly able to make himself heard however amid the din and laughter of the central group. He too had been watching Cicely Farrell—but with a wholly impassive countenance. Bridget made some indifferent answer, and then eagerly asked who the visitors were. She was told that they were officers from a neighbouring camp, including the general commanding the camp. Sir

William, said Captain Marsworth, had built the whole camp at his own expense, and on his own land, without waiting for any government contractor.

'I suppose he is so enormously rich—he can do anything he wants!' said Bridget, her face kindling. 'It must be grand never to think what you spend.'

Captain Marsworth was a trifle taken aback by the remark, as Sir William was barely a couple of yards away.

'Yes, I daresay it's convenient,' he said, lightly. 'And what do you find to do with yourself at Rydal?'

Bridget informed him briefly that she was correcting some proof-sheets for a friend, and would then have an index to make.

Captain Marsworth looked at her curiously.

'May one ask what the book is?'

'It's something new about psychology,' said Bridget, calmly. 'It's going to be a great deal talked about. My friend's awfully clever.'

'Ah! Doesn't she find it a little difficult to think about psychology just now?'

'Why should she? Somebody's got to think about psychology,' was the sharp reply. 'You can't let everything go, because there's a war.'

'I see! You remind me of a man I know, who's translating Dante. He's just over military age, and there he sits in a Devonshire valley, with a pile of books. I happen to know a particular department in

a public office that's a bit hustled for want of men, and I suggested that he should lend a hand. He said it was his business to keep culture going!'

'Well?' said Bridget.

The challenging obstinacy of her look daunted him. He laughed.

'You think it natural—and right—to take the war like that?'

'Well, I don't see who's got a right to interfere with you if you do,' she said, stiffly. Then, however, it occurred even to her obtuse and self-centred perception, that she was saying something unexpected and distasteful to a man who was clearly a great friend of the Farrells, and therefore a member of the world she envied. So she changed the subject.

'Does Miss Farrell ever do any real nursing?' she asked abruptly.

Captain Marsworth's look became, in a moment, reserved and cold. 'She's always ready to do anything for any of us!'

Then the speaker rose. 'I see Sir William's preparing to take your sister into the gardens. You certainly ought to see them. They're very famous.'

The party streamed out into the paths leading through a wood, and past a series of water-lily pools to the walled gardens. Sir William walked in front with Nelly.

'My brother's new craze!' said Cicely in the ear

of the General beside her, who being of heroic proportions had to stoop some way to hear the remark. He followed the direction of her eyes.

'What, that little woman? A vision! Is it only looks, or is there something besides?'

Cicely shrugged her shoulders.

'I don't know. I haven't found out. The sister's plain, disagreeable, stupid.'

'She looks rather clever.'

'Doesn't that show she's stupid? Nobody ought to look clever. Do you admire Mrs. Sarratt?'

'Can one help it? Or are you going also to maintain,' laughed the general, 'that no one can be beautiful who looks it?'

'One *could* maintain it—easily. The best kind of beauty has always to be discovered. What do you think, Captain Marsworth?'

She turned—provokingly—to the soldier on her left hand.

'About beauty?' He looked up listlessly. 'I've no idea. The day's too hot.'

Cicely eyed him.

'You're tired!' she said peremptorily. 'You've been doing too much. You ought to go and rest.'

He smiled, and standing back he let them pass him. Turning into a side path he disappeared towards the hospital.

'Poor old fellow!—he still looks very delicate,' said the General. 'How is he really getting on?'

'The arm's improving. He's having massage and

electricity. Sometimes he seems perfectly well,' said Cicely. An oddly defiant note had crept into the last sentence.

'He looks down—out of spirits. Didn't he lose nearly all his friends at Neuve Chapelle?'

'Yes, some of his best friends.'

'And half the battalion! He always cared enormously about his men. He and I, you know, fought in South Africa together. Of course then he was just a young subaltern. He's a splendid chap! I'm afraid he won't get to the front again. But of course they'll find him something at home. He ought to marry—get a wife to look after him. By the way, somebody told me there was some talk about him and the daughter of the rector here. A nice little girl. Do you know her?'

'Miss Stewart? Yes.'

'What do you think of her?'

'A little nincompoop. Quite harmless!'

The handsome hero smiled—unseen by his companion.

Meanwhile Farrell was walking with Nelly through the stately series of walled gardens, which his grandfather had planned and carried out, mainly it seemed for the boredom of the grandson.

'What do we want with all these things now?' he said, waving an impatient hand, as he and Nelly stood at the top flight of steps looking down upon the three gardens sloping to the south, with their fragments of statuary, and old leaden statuettes, ranged

along the central walks. 'They're all out of date. They were before the war; and the war has given them the *coup de grâce*. No more big estates—no more huge country houses! My grandfather built and built, for the sake of building, and I pay for his folly. After the war!—what sort of a world shall we tumble into!'

'I don't want these gardens destroyed!' said Nelly, looking up at him. 'No one ought to spoil them. They're far too beautiful!'

She was beginning to speak with more freedom, to be less afraid of him. The gap between her small provincial experience and modes of thought, and his, was narrowing. Each was beginning to discover the inner personality of the other. And the more Farrell explored her the more charmed he was. She was curiously ignorant, whether of books or life. Even the busy commercial life amid which she had been brought up, as it seemed to him, she had observed but little. When he asked her questions about Manchester, she was generally vague or puzzled. He saw that she was naturally romantic; and her passion for the absent Sarratt, together with her gnawing anxiety about him which could not be concealed, made her, again, very touching in the eyes of a man of imagination whose feelings were quick and soft. He walked about with her for more than an hour, discoursing ironically on the Grecian temples, the rustic bridges and pools and fountains, now in imitation of the older Versailles and now of the Tria-

non, with which his grandfather had burdened his descendants; so that the glorious evening, as it descended, presently became a merry duel between him and her, she defending and admiring his own possessions, and he attacking them. Her eyes sparkled, and a bright red—a natural red—came back into her pale cheeks. She spoke and moved with an evident exhilaration, as though she realised her own developing powers, and was astonished by her own readiness of speech, and the sheer pleasure of talk. And something, no doubt, entered in of the new scene; its scale and magnificence, so different from anything she had yet known; its suggestion of a tradition reaching back through many generations, and of a series of lives relieved from all vulgar necessities, playing as they pleased with art and money, with water and wood.

At the same time she was never merely dazzled; and never, for one moment, covetous or envious. He was struck with her simple dignity and independence; and he perfectly understood that a being so profoundly in love, and so overshadowed by a great fear, could only lend, so to speak, her outer mind to Carton or the persons in it. He gathered roses for her, and did his utmost to please her. But she seemed to him all the time like a little hovering elf—smiling and gay—but quite intangible.

Dinner in the ' cottage ' was short, but in Bridget's eyes perfect. Personally, she was not enjoying her-

self very much, for she had made up her mind that she did not get on with military men, and that it was their fault, not hers; so that she sat often silent, a fact however unnoticed in the general clatter of the table. She took it quite calmly, and was more than compensated for the lack of conversation by the whole spectacle of the Farrell wealth; the flowers, the silver, the costly accessories of all kinds, which even in war-time, and in a 'cottage,' seemed to be indispensable. It would have been more amusing, no doubt, if it had been the big house and not the cottage. Sometimes through the open windows and the trees, she caught sight of the great lighted pile a little way off, and found herself dreaming of what it would be to live there, and to command all that these people commanded. She saw herself sweeping through the magnificent rooms, giving orders, inviting guests, entertaining royalty, driving about the country in splendid motors. It was a waking dream, and though she never uttered a word, the animation of her thoughts infused a similar animation into her aspect, and made her almost unconscious of her neighbours. Captain Marsworth made several attempts to win her attention before she heard him.

'Yes.'

She turned at last an absent glance upon him.

'Miss Farrell talks of our all going over to the hospital after dinner. She and Sir William often spend the evening there,' said Captain Marsworth, quite aware from Miss Farrell's frequent glances in

his direction that he was not in her opinion doing his duty with Miss Cookson.

'Will it take us long?' said Bridget, the vivacity of her look dying out.

'As long as you please to stay!' laughed the Captain, drily.

That passage after dinner through the convalescent wards of the finely equipped hospital was to Nelly Sarratt an almost intolerable experience. She went bravely through it, leaving, wherever she talked to a convalescent, an impression of shy sweetness behind her, which made a good many eyes follow her as Farrell led her through the rooms. But she was thankful when it was over; and when, at last, she was alone in her room for the night, she flew—for consolation—to the drawer in which she had locked her writing-desk, and the letters she had received that morning. The post had just arrived as they were leaving Rydal, and she had hastily torn open a letter from George, and thrust the others into a large empty envelope. And now she discovered among them to her delight a second letter from George, unopened. What unexpected joy!

It too was dated—'Somewhere in France'—and had been written two days after the letter she had opened in the morning.

'My darling—we're having a real jolly time here—in an old village, far behind the line, and it is said we shall be here for three whole weeks. Well, some

of us really wanted it, for the battalion has been in some very hot fighting lately, and has had a nasty bit of the line to look after for a long time—with nothing very much to show for it. My platoon has lost some of its best men, and I've been pretty badly hit, as some of them were real chums of mine—the bravest and dearest fellows. And I don't know why, but for the first time, I've been feeling rather jumpy and run down. So I went to a doctor, and he told me I'd better go off duty for a fortnight. But just then, luckily, the whole battalion was ordered, as I told you a week ago, into what's called "divisional rest," so here we are—for three weeks! Quite good billets—an old French farm—with two good barns and lots of straw for the men, and an actual bedroom for me—and a real bed—*with sheets!* Think of that! I am as comfortable as possible. Just at first I'm going to stay in bed for a couple of days to please the doctor—but then I shall be all right, and shall probably take a course of gymnastics they're starting here—odd, isn't it?—like putting us to school again!—so that I may be quite fit before going back to the front.

'One might almost forget the war here, if it weren't for the rumble of the guns which hardly ever ceases. They are about thirty-five miles away. The whole country is quite peaceful, and the crops coming on splendidly. The farm produces delicious brown eggs—and you should see—and *taste*—the omelets the farmer's wife makes! Coffee too—first-rate!

How these French women work! Our men are always helping them, and the children hang round our Tommies like flies.

'These two days in bed are a godsend, for I can read all your letters through again. There they are —spread out on my sheet! By Jove, little woman, you've treated me jolly well! And now I can pay you back a little. But perhaps you won't mind, dearest, if I don't write anything very long, for I expect I ought to take it easy—for a bit—I can't think why I should have felt so slack. I never knew anything about nerves before. But the doctor has been very nice and understanding—a real, decent fellow. He declares I shall be as fit as a fiddle, long before the three weeks are done.

'My bedroom door is open, and some jolly yellow chickens are wandering in and out. And sometimes the farmer's youngest—a nice little chap of eight—comes to look at me. I teach him English—or I try —but when I say the English words, he just doubles up with laughing and runs away. Nelly, my precious —if I shut my eyes—I can fancy your little head there—just inside the door—and your eyes looking at me! . . . May the Lord give us good luck—and may we all be home by Christmas!—Mind you finish that sketch!'

She put the letter down with a rather tremulous hand. It had depressed her, and made her anxious. She read in it that George had been through horrible things—and had suffered.

Then all that she had seen in the hospital came back upon her, and rising restlessly she threw herself, without undressing, face downwards on her bed. That officer, blanched to the colour of white wax, who had lost a leg after frightful hæmorrhage; that other, the merest boy, whose right eye had been excised—she could not get them out of her mind, nor the stories they had told her of the actions in which they had been wounded.

'George—George!' It was a moan of misery, stifled in the darkness.

Then, suddenly, she remembered she had not said good-night to Bridget. She had forgotten Bridget. She had been unkind. She got up, and sped along the passage to Bridget's room.

'Bridget!' She just opened the door. 'May I come in?'

'Come in.'

Bridget was already in bed. In her hands was a cup of steaming chocolate which a maid had just brought her, and she was lingering over it with a face of content.

Nelly opened her eyes in astonishment.

'Did you ask for it, Bridget?'

'I did—or rather the housemaid asked what I would have. She said—"ladies have just what they like in their rooms." So I asked for chocolate.'

Nelly sat down on the bed.

'Is it good?'

'Excellent,' said Bridget calmly. 'Whatever did you expect?'

'We seem to have been eating ever since we came!' said Nelly frowning,—'and they call it economising!'

Bridget threw back her head with a quiet laugh.

'Didn't I tell you so?'

'I wondered how you got on at dinner?' said Nelly hesitating. 'Captain Marsworth didn't seem to be taking much trouble?'

'It didn't matter to me,' said Bridget. 'That kind of man always behaves like that.'

Nelly flushed.

'You mean soldiers behave like that?'

'Well, I don't like soldiers—brothers-in-law excepted, of course.' And Bridget gave her short, rather harsh laugh.

Nelly got up.

'Well, I shall be ready to go as early as you like on Monday, Bridget. It was awfully good of you to pack all my things so nicely!'

'Don't I always?' Bridget laughed.

'You do—you do indeed. Good-night.'

She touched Bridget's cheek with her lips and stole away.

Bridget was left to think. There was a dim light in the room showing the fine inlaid furniture, the flowery paper, the chintz-covered arm-chairs and sofa, and, through an open door, part of the tiled wall of the bathroom.

Miss Cookson had never slept in such a room before, and every item in it pleased a starved sense in her. Poverty was *hateful!* Could one never escape it?

Then she closed her eyes, and seemed to be watching Sir William and Nelly in the gardens, his protecting eager air—her face looking up. Of *course* she might have married him—with the greatest ease! —if only George Sarratt had not been in the way.

But supposing—

All the talk that evening had been of a new 'push' —a new and steady offensive, as soon as the shell supply was better. George would be in that 'push.' Nobody expected it for another month. By that time he would be back at the front. She lay and thought, her eyes closed, her harsh face growing a little white and pinched under the electric lamp beside her. Potentially, her thoughts were murderous. The *wish* that George might not return formed itself clearly, for the first time, in her mind. Dreams followed, as to consequences both for Nelly and herself, supposing he did not return. And in the midst of them she fell asleep.

CHAPTER VII

AUGUST came, the second August of the war. The heart of England was sad and sick, torn by the losses at Gallipoli, by the great disaster of the Russian retreat, by the shortage of munitions, by the endless small fighting on the British front, which eat away the young life of our race, week by week, and brought us no further. But the spirit of the nation was rising—and its grim task was becoming nakedly visible at last. *Guns—men!* Nothing else to say—nothing else to do.

George Sarratt's battalion returned to the fighting line somewhere about the middle of August. 'But we are only marking time,' he wrote to his wife. 'Nothing doing here, though the casualties go on every day. However we all know in our bones there will be plenty to do soon. As for me I am—more or less—all right again.'

Indeed, as September wore on, expectation quickened on both sides of the Channel. Nelly went in fear of she knew not what. The newspapers said little, but through Carton and the Farrells, she heard a great deal of military gossip. The shell supply was improving—the new Ministry of Munitions beginning to tell—a great blow was impending.

Weeks of rain and storm died down into an

autumnal gentleness. The bracken was turning on the hills, the woods beginning to dress for the pageant of October. The sketching lessons which the usual August deluge had interrupted were to begin again, as soon as Farrell came home. He had been in France for a fortnight, at Etaples, and in Paris, studying new methods and appliances for the benefit of the hospital. But whether he was at home or no, the benefactions of Carton never ceased. Almost every other day a motor from the Hall drove up laden with fruit and flowers, with books and magazines.

The fourth week of September opened. The rumours of coming events crept more heavily and insistently than ever through a sudden spell of heat that hung over the Lakes. Nelly Sarratt slept little, and wrote every day to her George, letters of which long sections were often destroyed when written, condemned for lack of cheerfulness.

She was much touched by Farrell's constant kindness, and grateful for it; especially because it seemed to keep Bridget in a good temper. She was grateful too for the visitors whom a hint from him would send on fine afternoons to call on the ladies at Rydal—convalescent officers, to whom the drive from Carton, and tea with 'the pretty Mrs. Sarratt' were an attraction, while Nelly would hang breathless on their gossip of the war, until suddenly, perhaps, she would turn white and silent, lying back in her garden chair with the look which the men talking

to her—brave, kind-hearted fellows—soon learnt to understand. Marsworth came occasionally, and Nelly grew to like him sincerely, and to be vaguely sorry for him, she hardly knew why. Cicely Farrell apparently forgot them entirely. And in August and the first part of September she too, according to Captain Marsworth's information, had been away, paying visits.

On the morning of September 26th, the Manchester papers which reached the cottage with the post contained columns of telegrams describing the British attack at Loos, and the French 'push' in Champagne. Among the letters was a short word from Sarratt, dated the 24th. 'We shall probably be in action to-morrow, dearest. I will wire as soon as I can, but you must not be anxious if there is delay. As far as I can judge it will be a big thing. You may be sure I shall take all the precautions possible. God bless you, darling. Your letters are *everything*.'

Nelly read the letter and the newspaper, her hands trembling as she held it. At breakfast, Bridget eyed her uncomfortably.

'He'll be all right!' she said with harsh decision. 'Don't fret.'

The day passed, with heavy heat mists over the Lake, the fells and the woods blotted out. On pretence of sketching, Nelly spent the hours on the side of Loughrigg, trying sometimes to draw or sew, but for the most part, lying with shut eyes, hidden among the bracken. Her faculty for dreaming awake—for

a kind of visualisation sharper than most people possess—had been much developed since George's departure. It partly tormented, partly soothed her.

Night came without news. 'I *can't* hear till tomorrow night,' she thought, and lay still all night patient and sleepless, her little hands crossed on her breast. The window was wide open and she could see the stars peering over Loughrigg.

Next morning, fresh columns in the newspaper. The action was still going on. She must wait. And somehow it was easier to wait this second day; she felt more cheerful. Was there some secret voice telling her that if he were dead, she would have heard?

After lunch she set out to take some of the Carton flowers to the farmer's wife living in a fold of the fell, who had lost her only son in the July fighting. Hester Martin had guided her there one day, and some fellow-feeling had established itself rapidly between Nelly, and the sad, dignified woman, whose duties went on as usual while all that gave them zest had departed.

The distance was short, and she left exact word where she could be found. As she climbed the narrow lane leading to the farm, she presently heard a motor approaching. The walls enclosing the lane left barely room to pass. She could only scramble hurriedly up a rock which had been built into the wall, and hold on to a young tree growing from it.

The motor which was large and luxurious passed slowly, and in the car she saw two young men, one pale and sickly-looking, wrapped in a great-coat though the day was stuffily warm: the other, the driver, a tall and stalwart fellow, who threw Nelly a cold, unfriendly look as they went by. Who could they be? The road only led to the farm, and when Nelly had last visited Mrs. Grayson, a week before, she and her old husband and a granddaughter of fourteen had been its only inmates.

Mrs. Grayson received her with a smile.

'Aye, aye, Mrs. Sarratt, coom in. Yo're welcome.'

But as Nelly entered the flagged kitchen, with its joints of bacon and its bunches of dried herbs, hanging from the low beamed ceiling, its wide hob grate, its dresser, table and chairs of old Westmorland oak, every article in it shining with elbow-grease,—she saw that Mrs. Grayson looked particularly tired and pale.

'Yo mun ha' passed them in t' lane?' said the farmer's wife wearily, when the flowers had been admired and put in water, and Nelly had been established in the farmer's own chair by the fire, while his wife insisted on getting an early cup of tea.

'Who were they, Mrs. Grayson?'

'Well, they're nobbut a queer soart, Mrs. Sarratt—and I'd be glad to see t' back on 'em. They're "conscientious objectors"—that's what they are—an my husband coom across them in Kendal toother

day. He'd finished wi t' market, and he strolled into the room at the Town Hall, where the men were coomin' in—yo know—to sign on for the war. An' he got talkin' wi' these two lads, who were lookin' on as he was. And they said they was " conscientious objectors "—and wouldn't fight not for nothing nor nobody. But they wouldn't mind doing their bit in other ways, they said. So John he upped and said—would they coom and help him with his second crop o' hay—you know we've lost nearly all our men, Mrs. Sarratt—and they said they would—and that very evening he brought 'em along. And who do you think they are?'

Nelly could not guess; and Mrs. Grayson explained that the two young men were the wealthy sons of a wealthy Liverpool tradesman and were starting a branch of their father's business in Kendal. They had each of them a motor, and apparently unlimited money. They had just begun to be useful in the hay-making—' But they wouldn't *touch* the stock—they wouldn't kill anything—not a rat! They wouldn't even shoo the birds from the oats! And last night one of them was took ill—and I must go and sit up with him, while his brother fetched the big car from Kendal to take him home. And there was he, groaning,—nobbut a bit of *colic,* Mrs. Sarratt, that anybody might have!—and there I sat—thinking of our lads in the trenches—thinking of *my boy*—that never grumbled at anything—and would ha' been just ashamed to make such a fuss for such a

little. And this afternoon the brother's taken him away to be molly-coddled at home. And, of course, they've left us, just when they might ha' been o' soom real service. There's three fields still liggin oot in t' wet—and nobody to lend a hand wi' them. But I doan't want them back! I doan't hold wi' foak like that. I doan't want to see a mon like that settin' where my boy used to set, when he came home. It goes agin me. I can't soomhow put up wi' it.'

And as she sat there opposite Nelly, her gnarled and work-stained hands resting on her knees, the tears suddenly ran over her cheeks. But she quickly apologised for herself. 'The truth is I am run doon, Mrs. Sarratt. I've done nothing but *cook* and *cook*—since these young men coom along. They wouldn't eat noa flesh—soa I must always be cookin' summat—vegetables—or fish—or sweet things. I'm fair tired oot!'

Nelly exclaimed indignantly.

'Was it their *religion* made them behave like that?'

'Religion!' Mrs. Grayson laughed. 'Well, they was only the yan Sunday here—but they took no account o't, whativer. They went motorin' all day; an niver set foot in church or chapel. They belong to soom Society or other—I couldna tell what. But we'll not talk o' them ony more, Mrs. Sarratt, if yo please. I'm just thankful they're gone. . . . An have ye heard this day of Mr. Sarratt?'

The gentle ageing face bent forward tenderly.

Nelly lifted her own dark-rimmed eyes to it. Her mouth quivered.

'No, not yet, Mrs. Grayson. But I shall soon. You'll have seen about this fighting in the newspapers? There's been a great battle—I think he'll have been in it. I shall hear to-night. I shall be sure to hear to-night.'

'The Lord protect him!' said Mrs. Grayson softly. They both sat silent, looking into the fire. Through the open door, the hens could be heard pecking and clucking in the yard, and the rushing of a beck swollen by the rain, on the fell-side. Presently the farmer's wife looked up—

'It's devil's work, is war!' she said, her eyes blazing. Nelly held out her hand and Mrs. Grayson put hers into it. The two women looked at each other,—the one who had lost, and the other who feared to lose.

'Yes, it's awful,' said Nelly, in a low voice. 'They want us to be brave—but——'

Mrs. Grayson shook her head again.

'We can do it when they're settin' there—afore us,' she said, 'but not when we're by our lone.'

Nelly nodded.

'It's the nights that are worst—' she murmured, under her breath—'because it's then they're fighting—when we're in bed—sleeping.'

'My boy was killed between one and two in the morning'—whispered Mrs. Grayson. 'I heard from one of his friends this morning. He says it was

a lovely night, and the daylight just comin' up. I think of it when I'm layin' awake and hearing the birds beginning.'

There was silence again, till Mrs. Grayson said, suddenly, with a strange passion:—

'But I'd rather be Jim's mother, and be settin' here without him, than I'd be the mother o' yan of them young fellows as is just gone!'

'Yes,' said Nelly slowly—'yes. If we think too much about keeping them safe—just for ourselves—they despise—they *would* despise us. And if anyone hangs back, we despise them. It' a horrible puzzle.'

'We can pray for them,' said Mrs. Grayson simply. 'God can keep them safe if it's His will.'

'Yes'—said Nelly again. But her tone was flat and hesitating. Her ever-present fear was very little comforted by prayer. But she found comfort in Mrs. Grayson. She liked to stay on in the old kitchen, watching Mrs. Grayson's household ways, making friends with the stolid tabby cat, or listening to stories of Jim as a child. Sometimes she would read parts of George's letters to this new friend. Bridget never cared to hear them; and she was more completely at ease with the farmer's wife even than with Hester Martin.

But she could not linger this afternoon. Her news might come any time. And Sir William had telephoned that morning to say that he and his sister would call on their way from Windermere, and

would ask for a cup of tea. Marsworth would probably meet them at Rydal.

As she descended the lane, she scolded herself for ingratitude. She was glad the Farrells were coming, because they would bring newspapers, and perhaps information besides, of the kind that does not get into newspapers. But otherwise—why had she so little pleasure now in the prospect of a visit from Sir William Farrell? He had never forced himself upon them. Neither his visits nor his lessons had been oppressively frequent, while the kindnesses which he had showered upon them, from a distance, had been unceasing. She could hardly have explained her disinclination. Was it that his company had grown so stimulating and interesting to her, that it made her think too much of other things than the war?—and so it seemed to separate her from George? Her own quiet occupations—the needlework and knitting that she did for a neighbouring war workroom, the gathering and drying of the sphagnum moss, the visiting of a few convalescent soldiers, a daily portion of Wordsworth, and some books about him—these things were within her compass; George knew all about them, for she chronicled them in her letters day by day. She had a happy peaceful sense of communion with him while she was busy with them. But Farrell's restless mind and wide culture at once tired and fascinated her. He would often bring a volume of Shelley, or Pater, or Hardy, or some quite modern poet, in his pocket, and

propose to read to her and Bridget, when the sketching was done. And as he read, he would digress into talk, the careless audacity of which would sometimes distress or repel, and sometimes absorb her; till suddenly, perhaps, she realised how far she was wandering from that common ground where she and George had moved together, and would try and find her way back to it. She was always learning some new thing; and she hated to learn, unless George changed and learnt with her.

Meanwhile Captain Marsworth was walking along the road from Grasmere to Rydal with a rather listless step. As a soldier he was by no means satisfied with the news of the week. We ought to have been in Lille and weren't. It seemed to him that was about what the Loos action came to; and his spirits were low. In addition he was in one of those fits of depression which attack an able man who has temporarily come to a stand-still in life, when his physical state is not buoyant enough to enable him to fight them off. He was beginning plainly to see that his own part in the war was done. His shattered arm, together with the neuralgic condition which had followed on the wound, were not going to mend sufficiently within any reasonable time to let him return to the fighting line, where, at the moment of his wound, he was doing divisional staff work, and was in the way of early promotion. He was a man of clear and vigorous mind, inclined always to take a

pessimistic view of himself and his surroundings, and very critical also of persons in authority; a scientific soldier, besides, indulging a strong natural contempt for the politicians and all their crew, only surpassed by a similar scorn of newspapers and the press. He had never been popular as a subaltern, but since he had conquered his place among the 'brains' of the army, his fame had spread, and it was freely prophesied that his rise would be rapid. So that his growing conviction that his active military career was over had been the recent cause in him of much bitterness of soul. It was a bitter realisation, and a recent one. He had been wounded at Neuve Chapelle in March, and up to July he had been confident of complete and rapid recovery.

Well, there was of course some compensation. A post in the War Office—in the Intelligence Department—would, he understood, be offered him; and by October he meant to be at work. Meanwhile an old school and college friendship between himself and 'Bill Farrell,' together with the special facilities at Carton for the treatment of neuralgia after wounds, had made him an inmate for several months of the special wing devoted to such cases in the splendid hospital; though lately by way of a change of surroundings, he had been lodging with the old Rector of the village of Carton, whose house was kept—and well kept—by a sweet-looking and practical granddaughter, herself an orphan.

Marsworth had connections in high quarters, and possessed some considerable means. He had been a frequenter of the Farrells since the days when the old aunt was still in command, and Cicely was a young thing going to her first dances. He and she had sparred and quarrelled as boy and girl. Now that, after a long interval, they had again been thrown into close contact, they sparred and quarrelled still. He was a man of high and rather stern ideals, which had perhaps been intensified—made a little grimmer and fiercer than before—by the strain of the war; and the selfish frivolity of certain persons and classes in face of the national ordeal was not the least atoned for in his eyes by the heroism of others. The endless dress advertisements in the daily papers affected him as they might have affected the prophet Ezekiel, had the daughters of Judah added the purchase of fur coats, priced from twenty guineas to two hundred to their other enormities. He had always in his mind the agonies of the war, the sights of the trenches, the holocaust of young life, the drain on the national resources, the burden on the national future. So that the Farrell motor-cars and men servants, the costly simplicity of the 'cottage,' Cicely's extravagance in dress, her absurd and expensive uniform, her make-up and her jewels, were so many daily provocations to a man thus sombrely possessed.

And yet—he had not been able so far to tear himself away from Carton! And he knew many

things about Cicely Farrell that Nelly Sarratt had not discovered; things that alternately softened and enraged him; things that kept him now, as for some years past, provokingly, irrationally interested in her. He had once proposed to her, and she had refused him. That was known to a good many people. But what their relations were now was a mystery to the friends on both sides.

Whatever they were, however, on this September afternoon Marsworth was coming rapidly to the conclusion that he had better put an end to them. His latent feelings of resentment and irritation had been much sharpened of late by certain passages of arms between himself and Cicely—since she returned from her visits—with regard to that perfectly gentle and inoffensive little maiden, Miss Daisy Stewart, the Rector's granddaughter. Miss Farrell had several times been unpardonably rude to the poor child in his presence, and, as it seemed to him, with the express object of showing him how little she cared to keep on friendly terms with him.

Nevertheless—he found himself puzzling over certain other incidents in his recent ken, of a different character. The hospital at Carton was mainly for privates, with a certain amount of accommodation for officers. He had done his best during the summer to be useful to some poor fellows, especially of his own regiment, on the Tommies' side. And he had lately come across some perplexing signs of

a special thoughtfulness on Miss Farrell's part for these particular men. He had discovered also that she had taken pains to keep these small kindnesses of hers from his knowledge.

'I wasn't to tell you, sir,'—said the boy who had lost an eye—'not whatever. But when you come along with them things'—a set of draughts and a book—'why it do seem as though I be gettin' more than my share!'

Well, she had always been incomprehensible—and he was weary of the attempt to read her. But he wanted a home—he wanted to marry. He began to think again—in leisurely fashion—of the Rector's granddaughter.

Was that Mrs. Sarratt descending the side-lane? The sight of her recalled his thoughts instantly to the war, and to a letter he had received that morning from a brother officer just arrived in London on medical leave—the letter of a 'grouser' if ever there was one.

'They say that this week is to see another big push—the French probably in Champagne, and we south of Béthune. I know nothing first-hand, but I do know that it can only end in a few kilometres of ground, huge casualties,—and, as you were! *We are not ready*—we can't be ready for months. On the other hand we must keep moving—if only to kill a few Germans, and keep our own people at home in heart. I passed some of the Lanchesters on my way down—going up, as fresh as paint after three

weeks' rest—what's left of them. They're sure to be in it.'

The little figure in the mauve cotton had paused at the entrance to the lane, perceiving him.

What about Sarratt? Had she heard? He hurried on to meet her, and put his question.

'There can't be any telegram yet,' she said, her pale cheeks flushing. 'But it will come to-night. Shall we go back quickly?'

They walked on rapidly. He soon found she did not want to talk of the news, and he was driven back on the weather.

'What a blessing to see the sun again! this west country damp demoralises me.'

'I think I like it!'

He laughed.

'Do you only "say that to annoy"?'

'No, I *do* like it! I like to see the rain shutting out everything, so that one can't make any plans—or go anywhere.' She smiled, but he was well aware of the fever in her look. He had not seen it there since the weeks immediately following Sarratt's departure. His heart warmed to the frail creature, tremulous as a leaf in the wind, yet making a show of courage. He had often asked himself whether he would wish to be loved as Mrs. Sarratt evidently loved her husband; whether he could possibly meet such a claim upon his own sensibility. But to-day he thought he could meet it; to-day he thought it would be agreeable.

Nelly had not told Marsworth however that one reason for which she liked the rain was that it had temporarily put an end to the sketching lessons. Nor could she have added that this new distaste in her, as compared with the happy stir of fresh or quickened perception, which had been the result of his early teaching, was connected, not only with Sir William—but with Bridget—her sister Bridget.

But the truth was that something in Bridget's manner, very soon after the Carton visit, had begun to perplex and worry the younger sister. Why was Bridget always insisting on the lessons?—always ready to scold Nelly if one was missed—and always practising airs and graces with Sir William that she wasted on no one else? Why was she so frequently away on the days when Sir William was expected? Nelly had only just begun to notice it, and to fall back instinctively on Miss Martin's company whenever it could be had. She hated her own vague annoyance with Bridget's behaviour, just because she could not pour herself out to George about it. It was really too silly and stupid to talk about. She supposed—she dreaded—that Bridget might be going to ask Sir William some favour; that she meant to make use of his kindness to her sister in order to work upon him. How horrible that would be!—how it would spoil everything! Nelly began sometimes to dream of moving, of going to Borrowdale, or to the coast at Scascale. And then, partly her natural indolence, and partly her clinging to every

rock and field in this beautiful place where she had been so happy, intervened; and she let things slide.

Yet when Sir William and Cicely arrived, to find Bridget making tea, and Nelly listening with a little frown of effort, while Marsworth, pencil in hand, was drawing diagrams *à la Belloc,* to explain to her the Russian retreat from Galicia, how impossible not to feel cheered by Farrell's talk and company! The great *bon enfant,* towering in the little room, and positively lighting it up by the red-gold of his hair and beard, so easily entertained, so overflowing with kind intentions, so fastidious intellectually, and so indulgent morally:—as soon as he appeared he filled the scene.

'No fresh news, dear Mrs. Sarratt, nothing whatever,' he said at once, meeting her hungry eyes. 'And you?'

She shook her head.

'Don't worry. You'll get it soon. I've sent the motor back to Windermere for the evening papers.'

Meanwhile Marsworth found himself reduced to watching Cicely, and presently he found himself more angry and disgusted than he had ever yet been. How could she? How dared she? On this day of all days, to be snobbishly playing the great lady in Mrs. Sarratt's small sitting-room! Whenever that was Cicely's mood she lisped; and as often as Marsworth, who was sitting far away from her, talking to Bridget Cookson, caught her voice, it seemed to him that she was lisping—affectedly—

monstrously. She was describing for instance a certain ducal household in which she had just been spending the week-end, and Marsworth heard her say—

'Well at last, poor Evelyn' ('poor Evelyn' seemed to be a youthful Duchess, conducting a war economy campaign through the villages of her husband's estate), 'began to get threatening letters. She found out afterwards they came from a nursemaid she had sent away. "Madam, don't you talk to us, but look at 'ome! examine your own nursewy, Madam, and hold your tongue!" She did examine, and I found her cwying. "Oh, Cicely, isn't it awful, I've just discovered that Nurse has been spending *seven pounds a week* on Baby's wibbons!" So she's given up war economy!'

'Why not the "wibbons?"' said Hester Martin, who had just come in and heard the tale.

'Because nobody gives up what they weally want to have,' said Cicely promptly, with a more affected voice and accent than before.

Bridget pricked up her ears and nodded triumphantly towards Nelly.

'Don't talk nonsense, Cicely,' said Farrell. 'Why, the Duchess has planted the whole rose-garden with potatoes, and sold all her Pekinese.'

'Only because she was tired of the Pekinese, and has so many flowers she doesn't know what to do with them! On the other hand the *Duke* wants parlour-maids; and whenever he says so, Evelyn

draws all the blinds down and goes to bed. And that annoys him so much that he gives in! Don't you talk, Willy. The Duchess always gets wound you!'

'I don't care twopence about her,' said Farrell, rather savagely. 'What does she matter?' Then he moved towards Nelly, whose absent look and drooping attitude he had been observing for some minutes.

'Shan't we go down to the Lake, Mrs. Sarratt? It seems really a fine evening at last, and there won't be so many more. Let me carry some shawls. Marsworth, lend a hand.'

Soon they were all scattered along the edge of the Lake. Hester Martin had relieved Marsworth of Bridget; Farrell had found a dry rock, and spread a shawl upon it for Nelly's benefit. Marsworth and Cicely had no choice but to pair; and she, with a grey hat and plume half a yard high, preposterously short skirts, and high-heeled boots buttoned to the knee, condescended to stroll beside him, watching his grave embarrassed look with an air of detachment as dramatically complete as she could make it.

'You look awfully tired!' said Farrell to his companion, eyeing her with most sincere concern. 'I wonder what you've been doing to yourself.'

'I'm all right,' she said with emphasis. 'Indeed I'm all right. You said you'd sent for the papers?'

'The motor will wait for them at Windermere.

But I don't think there'll be much more to hear. I'm afraid we've shot our bolt.'

She clasped her hands listlessly on her knee, and said nothing.

'Are you quite sure Sarratt has been in it?' he asked her.

'Oh, yes, I'm sure.'

There was a dull conviction in her voice. She began to pluck at the grass beside her, while her dark contracted eyes swept the Lake in front of her —seeing nothing.

'Good God!'—thought Farrell—'Are they all —all the women—suffering like this?'

'You'll get a telegram from him to-morrow, I'm certain you will!' he said, with eager kindness. 'Try and look forward to it. You know the good chances are five to one.'

'Not for a lieutenant,' she said, under her breath. 'They have to lead their men. They can't think of their own lives.'

There was silence a little. Then Farrell said— floundering, 'He'd want you to bear up!'

'I am bearing up!' she said quickly, a little resentfully.

'Yes, indeed you are!' He touched her arm a moment caressingly, as though in apology. It was natural to his emotional temperament to express itself so—through physical gesture. But Nelly disliked the touch.

'I only meant'—Farrell continued, anxiously—

'that he would beg you not to anticipate trouble —not to go to meet it.'

She summoned smiles, altering her position a little, and drawing a wrap round her. The delicate arm was no longer within his reach.

And restlessly she began to talk of other things—the conscientious objectors of the morning—Zeppelins—a recruiting meeting at Ambleside. Farrell had the impression of a wounded creature that could not bear to be touched; and it was something new to his prevailing sense of power in life, to be made to realise that he could do nothing. His sympathy seemed to alienate her; and he felt much distressed and rebuffed.

Meanwhile as the clouds cleared away from the September afternoon, Marsworth and Cicely were strolling along the Lake, and sparring as usual.

He had communicated to her his intention of leaving Carton within a week or so, and trying some fresh treatment in London.

'You're tired of us?' she enquired, her head very much in air.

'Not at all. But I think I might do a bit of work.'

'The doctors don't think so.'

'Ah, well—when a man's got to my stage, he must make experiments on his own. It won't be France—I know that. But there's lots else.'

'You'll break down in a week!' she said with energy. 'I had a talk about you with Seaton yesterday.'

He looked at her with amusement. For the moment, she was no longer Cicely Farrell, extravagantly dressed, but the shrewd hospital worker, who although she would accept no responsibility that fettered her goings and comings beyond a certain point, was yet, as he well knew, invaluable, as a force in the background, to both the nursing and medical staff of Carton.

'Well, what did Seaton say?'

'That you would have another bad relapse, if you attempted yet to go to work.'

'I shall risk it.'

'That's so like you. You never take anyone's advice.'

'On the contrary, I am the meekest and most docile of men.' She shrugged her shoulders.

'You were docile, I suppose, when Seaton begged you not to go off to the Rectory, and give yourself all that extra walking backwards and forwards to the hospital every day?'

'I wanted a change of scene. I like the old Rector—I even like family prayers.'

'I am sure everything—and *everybody*—is perfect at the Rectory!'

'No—not perfect—but peaceable.'

He looked at her smiling. His grey eyes, under their strong black brows, challenged her. She per-

ceived in them a whole swarm of unspoken charges. Her own colour rose.

'So peace is what you want?'

'Peace—and a little sympathy.'

'And we give you neither?'

He hesitated.

'Willy never fails one.'

'So it's my crimes that are driving you away? It's all to be laid on my shoulders?'

He laughed—uncertainly.

'Don't you believe me when I say I want to do some work?'

'Not much. So I have offended you?'

His look changed, became grave—touched with compunction.

'Miss Farrell, I oughtn't to have been talking like this. You and Willy have been awfully good to me.'

'And then you call me "Miss Farrell"!' she cried, passionately—'when you know very well that you've called me Cicely for years.'

'Hush!' said Marsworth suddenly, 'what was that?'

He turned back towards Rydal. On the shore path, midway between them and the little bay at the eastern end of the lake, where Farrell and Nelly Sarratt had been sitting, were Hester Martin and Bridget. They too had turned round, arrested in their walk. Beyond them, at the edge of the water, Farrell could be seen beckoning. And a little way

behind him on the slope stood a boy with a bicycle.

'He is calling us,' said Marsworth, and began to run.

Hester Martin was already running—Bridget too.

But Hester and Marsworth outstripped the rest. Farrell came to meet them.

'Hester, for God's sake, get her sister!'

'What is it?' gasped Hester. 'Is he killed?'

'No—"Wounded and missing!" Poor, poor child!'

'Where is she?'

'She's sitting there—dazed—with the telegram. She's hardly said anything since it came.'

Hester ran on. There on a green edge of the bank sat Nelly staring at a fluttering piece of paper.

Hester sank beside her, and put her arms round her.

'Dear Mrs. Sarratt!'

'What does it mean?' said Nelly turning her white face. 'Read it.'

'"Deeply regret to inform you your husband reported wounded and missing!"'

'*Missing?* That means—a prisoner. George is a prisoner—and wounded! Can't I go to him?'

She looked piteously at Hester. Bridget had come up and was standing near.

'If he's a prisoner, he's in a German hospital. Dear Mrs. Sarratt, you'll soon hear of him!'

Nelly stood up. Her young beauty of an hour

before seemed to have dropped from her like the petals of a rose. She put her hand to her forehead.

'But I shan't see him—again'—she said slowly —'till the end of the war—*the end of the war*'—she repeated, pressing her hands on her eyes. The note of utter desolation brought the tears to Hester's cheeks. But before she could say anything, Nelly had turned sharply to her sister.

'Bridget, I must go up to-night!'

'Must you?' said Bridget reluctantly. 'I don't see what you can do.'

'I can go to the War Office—and to that place where they make enquiries for you. Of *course,* I must go to London!—and I must stay there. There might be news of him any time.'

Bridget and Hester looked at each other. The same thought was in their minds. But Nelly, restored to momentary calmness by her own suggestion, went quickly to Farrell, who with his sister and Marsworth was standing a little way off.

'I must go to London to-night, Sir William. Could you order something for me?'

'I'll take you to Windermere, Mrs. Sarratt,' said Cicely before her brother could reply. 'The motor's there now.'

'No, no, Cicely, I'll take Mrs. Sarratt,' said Farrell impatiently. 'I'll send back a car from Ambleside, for you and Marsworth.'

'You forget Sir George Whitehead,' said Cicely quietly. 'I'll do everything.'

Sir George Whitehead of the A.M.S.C. was expected at Carton that evening on a visit of inspection to the hospital. Farrell, as Commandant, could not possibly be absent. He acknowledged the fact by a gesture of annoyance. Cicely immediately took things in charge.

A whirl of packing and departure followed. By the time she and her charges left for Windermere, Cicely's hat and high heels had been entirely blotted out by a quite extraordinary display on her part of both thoughtfulness and efficiency. Marsworth had seen the same transformation before, but never so markedly. He tried several times to make his peace with her; but she held aloof, giving him once or twice an odd look out of her long almond-shaped eyes.

'Good-bye, and good luck!' said Farrell to Nelly, through the car window; and as she held out her hand, he stooped and kissed it with a gulp in his throat. Her deathly pallor and a grey veil thrown back and tied under her small chin gave her a ghostly loveliness which stamped itself on his recollection.

'I am going up to town myself to-morrow. I shall come and see if I can do anything for you.'

'Thank you,' said Nelly mechanically. 'Oh yes, I shall have thought of many things by then. Good-bye.'

Marsworth and Farrell were left to watch the disappearance of the car along the moonlit road.

'Poor little soul!' said Farrell—'poor little soul!' He walked on along the road, his eyes on the ground. Marsworth offered him a cigar, and they smoked in silence.

'What'll the next message be?' said Farrell, after a little while. '"Reported wounded and missing—now reported killed"? Most probable!'

Marsworth assented sadly.

CHAPTER VIII

IT was a pale September day. In the country, among English woods and heaths the sun was still strong, and trees and bracken, withered heath, and reddening berries, burned and sparkled beneath it. But in the dingy bedroom of a dingy Bloomsbury hotel, with a film of fog over everything outside, there was no sun to be seen; the plane trees beyond the windows were nearly leafless; and the dead leaves scudding and whirling along the dusty, airless streets, under a light wind, gave the last dreary touch to the scene that Nelly Sarratt was looking at. She was standing at a window, listlessly staring at some houses opposite, and the unlovely strip of garden which lay between her and the houses. Bridget Cookson was sitting at a table a little way behind her, mending some gloves.

The sisters had been four days in London. For Nelly, life was just bearable up to five or six o'clock in the evening because of her morning and afternoon visits to the Enquiry Office in D—— Street, where everything that brains and pity could suggest was being done to trace the 'missing'; where sat also that kind, tired woman, at the table which Nelly by now knew so well, with her pitying eyes, and her soft voice, which never grew perfunctory

or careless. 'I'm *so* sorry!—but there's no fresh news.' That had been the evening message; and now the day's hope was over, and the long night had to be got through.

That morning, however, there had been news—a letter from Sarratt's Colonel, enclosing letters from two privates, who had seen Sarratt go over the parapet in the great rush, and one of whom had passed him—wounded—on the ground and tried to stay by him. But 'Lieutenant Sarratt wouldn't allow it.' 'Never mind me, old chap'—one witness reported him as saying. 'Get on. They'll pick me up presently.' And there they had left him, and knew no more.

Several other men were named, who had also seen him fall, but they had not yet been traced. They might be in hospital badly wounded, or if Sarratt had been made prisoner, they had probably shared his fate. 'And if your husband has been taken prisoner, as we all hope,' said the gentle woman at the office—'it will be at least a fortnight before we can trace him. Meanwhile we are going on with all other possible enquiries.'

Nelly had those phrases by heart. The phrases too of that short letter—those few lines—the last she had ever received from George, written two days before the battle, which had reached her in Westmorland before her departure.

That letter lay now on her bosom, just inside the folds of her blouse, where her hand could rest

upon it at any moment. How passionately she had hoped for another, a fragment perhaps torn from his notebook in the trenches, and sent back by some messenger at the last moment! She had heard of that happening to so many others. Why not to her! —oh, why not to her?

Her heart was dry with longing and grief; her eyes were red for want of sleep. There were strange numb moments when she felt nothing, and could hardly remember why she was in London. And then would come the sudden smart of reviving consciousness—the terrible returns of an anguish, under which her whole being trembled. And always, at the back of everything, the dull thought—'I always knew it—I knew he would die!'—recurring again and again; only to be dashed away by a protest no less persistent —'No, no! He is *not dead!—not dead!* In a fortnight—she said so—there'll be news—they'll have found him. Then he'll be recovering—and prisoners are allowed to write. Oh, my George!—my George!'

It was with a leap of ecstasy that yet was pain, that she imagined to herself the coming of the first word from him. Prisoners' letters came regularly—no doubt of that. Why, the landlady at the hotel had a son who was at Ruhleben, and she heard once a month. Nelly pictured the moment when the letter would be in her hand, and she would be looking at it. Oh, no doubt it wouldn't be addressed by him! By the nurse perhaps—a German nurse—or

another patient. He mightn't be well enough. All the same, the dream filled her eyes with tears, that for a moment eased the burning within.

Her life was now made up of such moments and dreams. On the whole, what held her most was the fierce refusal to think of him as dead. That morning, in dressing, among the clothes they had hurriedly brought with them from Westmorland, she saw a thin black dress—a useful stand-by in the grime of London—and lifted her hands to take it from the peg on which it hung. Only to recoil from it with horror. *That*—never! And she had dressed herself with care in a coat and skirt of rough blue tweed that George had always liked; scrupulously putting on her little ornaments, and taking pains with her hair. And at every step of the process, she seemed to be repelling some attacking force; holding a door with all her feeble strength against some horror that threatened to come in.

The room in which she stood was small and cheerless; but it was all they could afford. Bridget frankly hated the ugliness and bareness of it; hated the dingy hotel, and the slatternly servants, hated the boredom of the long waiting for news to which apparently she was to be committed, if she stayed on with Nelly. She clearly saw that public opinion would expect her to stay on. And indeed she was not without some natural pity for her younger sister. There were moments when Nelly's state caused her extreme discomfort—even something more. But when they

occurred, she banished them as soon as possible, and with a firm will, which grew the firmer with exercise. It was everybody's duty to keep up their spirits and not to be beaten down by this abominable war. And it was a special duty for those who hated the war, and would stop it at once if they could. Yet Bridget had entirely declined to join any 'Stop the War,' or pacifist societies. She had no sympathy with 'that sort of people.' Her real opinion about the war was that no cause could be worth such wretched inconvenience as the war caused to everyone. She hated to feel and know that probably the majority of decent people would say, if asked,—as Captain Marsworth had practically said—that she, Bridget Cookson, ought to be doing V.A.D. work, or relieving munition-workers at week-ends, instead of fiddling with an index to a text-book on 'The New Psychology.' The mere consciousness of that was already an attack on her personal freedom to do what she liked, which she hotly resented. And as to that conscription of women for war-work which was vaguely talked of, Bridget passionately felt that she would go to prison rather than submit to such a thing. For the war said nothing whatever to her heart or conscience. All the great tragic side of it—the side of death and wounds and tears—of high justice and ideal aims—she put away from her, as she always had put away such things, in peace. They did not concern her personally. Why *make* trouble for oneself?

And yet here was a sister whose husband was

'wounded and missing'—probably, as Bridget firmly believed, already dead. And the meaning of that fact—that possibility—was writ so large on Nelly's physical aspect, on Nelly's ways and plans, that there was really no getting away from it. Also—there were other people to be considered. Bridget did not at all want to offend or alienate Sir William Farrell —now less than ever. And she was quite aware that he would think badly of her, if he suspected she was not doing her best for Nelly.

The September light waned. The room grew so dark that Bridget turned on an electric light beside her, and by the help of it stole a long look at Nelly, who was still standing by the window. Would grieving—would the loss of George—take Nelly's prettiness away? She had certainly lost flesh during the preceding weeks and days. Her little chin was very sharp, as Bridget saw it against the window, and her hair seemed to have parted with its waves and curls, and to be hanging limp about her ears. Bridget felt a pang of annoyance that anything should spoil Nelly's good looks. It was altogether unnecessary and absurd.

Presently Nelly moved back towards her sister.

'I don't know how I shall get through the next fortnight,' she said in a low voice. 'I wonder what we had better do?'

'Well, we can't stay here,' said Bridget sharply. 'It's too expensive, though it is such a poky hole. We can find a lodging, I suppose, and feed ourselves.

Unless of course we went back to Westmorland. Why can't you? They can always telegraph.'

Nelly flushed. Her hand lying on the back of Bridget's chair shook.

'And if George sent for me,' she said, in the same low, strained voice, 'it would take eight hours longer to get to him than it would from here.'

Bridget said nothing. In her heart of hearts she felt perfectly certain that George never would send. She rose and put down her needlework.

'I must go and post a letter downstairs. I'll ask the woman in the office if she knows anything about lodgings.'

Nelly went back to her post by the window. Her mind was bruised between two conflicting feelings —a dumb longing for someone to caress and comfort her, someone who would meet her pain with a bearing less hard and wooden than Bridget's— and at the same time, a passionate shrinking from the bare idea of comfort and sympathy, as something not to be endured. She had had a kind letter from Sir William Farrell that morning. He had spoken of being soon in London. But she did not know that she could bear to see him—unless he could help—get something *done!*

Bridget descended to the ground floor, and had a conversation with the young lady in the office, which threw no light at all on the question of lodgings. The young lady in question seemed to be patting and pinning up her back hair all the time,

besides carrying on another conversation with a second young lady in the background. Bridget was disgusted with her and was just going upstairs again, when the very shabby and partly deformed hall porter informed her that someone—a gentleman—was waiting to see her in the drawing-room.

A gentleman? Bridget hastened to the small and stuffy drawing-room, where the hall porter had just turned on the light, and there beheld a tall bearded man pacing up and down, who turned abruptly as she entered.

'How is she? Is there any news?'

Sir William Farrell hurriedly shook her offered hand, frowning a little at the sister who always seemed to him inadequate and ill-mannered.

'Thank you, Sir William; she is quite well. There is a little news—but nothing of any consequence.'

She repeated the contents of the hospital letter, with the comments on it of the lady they had seen at the office.

'We shan't hear anything more for a fortnight. They have written to Geneva.'

'Then they think he's a prisoner?'

Bridget supposed so.

'At any rate they hope he is. Well, I'm thankful there's no worse news. Poor thing—poor little thing! Is she bearing up—eating?—sleeping?'

He asked the questions peremptorily, yet with a real anxiety. Bridget vaguely resented the peremptoriness, but she answered the questions. It was

very difficult to get Nelly to eat anything, and Bridget did not believe she slept much.

Farrell shook his head impatiently, with various protesting noises, while she spoke. Then drawing up suddenly, with his hands in his pockets, he looked round the room in which they stood.

'But why are you staying here? It's a dreadful hole! That porter gave me the creeps. And it's so far from everywhere.'

'There is a tube station close by. We stay here because it's cheap,' said Bridget, grimly.

Sir William walked up the room again, poking his nose into the moribund geranium that stood, flanked by some old railway guides, on the middle table, surveyed the dirty and ill-kept writing-table, the uncomfortable chairs, and finally went to look out of the window; after which he suddenly and unaccountably brightened up and turned with a smile to Bridget.

'Do you think you could persuade your sister to do something that would please me very much?'

'I'm sure I don't know, Sir William.'

'Well, it's this. Cicely and I have a flat in St. James' Square. I'm there very little just now, and she less. You know we're both awfully busy at Carton. We've had a rush of wounded the last few weeks. I must be up sometimes on business for the hospital, but I can always sleep at my club. So what I want to persuade you to do, Miss Cookson, is to

get Mrs. Sarratt to accept the loan of our flat, for a few weeks while she's kept in town. It would be a real pleasure to us. We're awfully sorry for her!'

He beamed upon her, all his handsome face suffused with kindness and concern.

Bridget was amazed, but cautious.

'It's awfully good of you—but—shouldn't we have to get a servant? I couldn't do everything.'

Sir William laughed.

'Gracious—I should think not! There are always servants there—it's kept ready for us. I put in a discharged soldier—an army cook and his wife—a few months ago. They're capital people. I'm sure they'd look after you. Well now, will you suggest that to Mrs. Sarratt? Could I see her?'

Bridget hesitated. Some instinct told her that Nelly would not wish to accept this proposal. She said slowly—

'I'm afraid she's very tired to-night.'

'Oh, don't bother her then! But just try and persuade her—won't you—quietly? And send me a word to-night.'

He gave the address.

'If I hear that you'll come, I'll make all the arrangements to-morrow morning before I leave for Westmorland. You can just take her round in a taxi any time you like, and the servants will be quite ready for you. You'll be close to D—— Street —close to everything. Now do!'

He stood with his hands on his side looking down

eagerly and a little sharply on the hard-featured woman before him.

'It's awfully good of you,' said Bridget again—'most awfully good. Of course I'll tell Nelly what you say.'

'And drop me a line to-night?'

'Yes, I'll write.'

Sir William took up his stick.

'Well, I shall put everything in train. Tell her, please, what a pleasure she'd give us. And she won't keep Cicely away. Cicely will be up next week. But there's plenty of room. She and her maid wouldn't make any difference to you. And please tell Mrs. Sarratt too, that if there's anything I can do—*anything*—she has only to let me know.'

Bridget went back to the room upstairs. As she opened the door she saw Nelly standing under the electric light—motionless. Something in her attitude startled Bridget.

She called—

'Nelly!'

Nelly turned slowly, and Bridget saw that she had a letter in her hand. Bridget ran up to her.

'Have you heard anything?'

'He *did* write to me!—he did!—just the last minute—in the trench. I knew he must. He gave it to an engineer officer who was going back to Headquarters, to post. The officer was badly wounded as he went back. They've sent it me from France.

The waiter brought me the letter just after you'd gone down.'

The words came in little panting gasps.

Then, suddenly, she slipped down beside the table at which Bridget had been working, and hid her face. She was crying. But it was very difficult weeping—with few tears. The slight frame shook from top to toe.

Bridget stood by her, not knowing what to do. But she was conscious of a certain annoyance that she couldn't begin at once on the subject of the flat. She put her hand awkwardly on her sister's shoulder.

'Don't cry so. What does he say?'

Nelly did not answer for a little. At last she said, her face still buried—

'It was only—to tell me—that he loved me——'

There was silence again. Then Nelly rose to her feet. She pressed her hair back from her white face.

'I don't want any supper, Bridget. I think—I should like to go to bed.'

Bridget helped her to undress. It was now nearly dark and she drew down the blinds. When she looked again at Nelly, she saw her lying white and still, her wide eyes fixed on vacancy.

'I found a visitor downstairs,' she said, abruptly. 'It was Sir William Farrell.'

Nelly shewed no surprise, or interest. But she seemed to find some words mechanically.

'Why did he come?'

Bridget came to the bedside.

'He wants us to go and stay at his flat—their flat. He and his sister have it together—in St. James' Square. He wants us to go to-morrow. He's going back to Carton. There are two servants there. We shouldn't have any trouble. And you'd be close to D—— Street. Any news they got they could send round directly.'

Nelly closed her eyes.

'I don't care where we go,' she said, under her breath.

'He wanted a line to-night,' said Bridget—'I can't hear of any lodgings. And the boarding-houses are all getting frightfully expensive—because food's going up so.'

'Not a boarding-house!' murmured Nelly. A shiver of repulsion ran through her. She was thinking of a boarding-house in one of the Bloomsbury streets where she and Bridget had once stayed before her marriage—the long tables full of strange faces—the drawing-room crowded with middle-aged women, who stared so.

'Well, I can write to him to-night then, and say we'll go to-morrow? We certainly can't stay here. The charges are abominable. If we go to their flat, for a few days, we can look round us and find something cheap.'

'Where is it?' said Nelly faintly.

'In St. James' Square.'

The address conveyed very little to Nelly. She knew hardly anything of London. Two visits—one

to some cousins in West Kensington, another to a friend at Hampstead—together with the fortnight three years ago in the Bloomsbury boarding-house, when Bridget had had some grand scheme with a publisher which never came off, and Nelly had mostly stayed indoors with bad toothache:—her acquaintance with the great city had gone no further. Of its fashionable quarters both she and Bridget were entirely ignorant, though Bridget would not have admitted it.

Bridget got her writing-case out of her trunk and began to write to Sir William. Nelly watched her. At last she said slowly, as though she were becoming a little more conscious of the world around her:—

'It's awfully kind of them. But we needn't stay long.'

'Oh no, we needn't stay long.'

Bridget wrote the letter, and disappeared to post it. Nelly was left alone in darkness. The air about her seemed to be ringing with the words of her letter.

'My own Darling,—We are just going over. I have found a man going back to D.H.Q. who will post this—and I just want you to know that, whatever happens, you are my beloved, and our love can't die. God bless you, my dear, dear wife. . . . We are all in good spirits—everything ought to go well—and I will write the first moment possible.

'George.'

She seemed to see him, tearing the leaf from the little block she had given him, and standing in the trench, so slim and straight in his khaki. And then, what happened after? when the rush came? Would she never know? If he never came back to her, what was she going to do with her life? Waves of lonely terror went through her—terror of the long sorrow before her—terror of her own weakness.

And then again—reaction. She sat up in bed, angrily wrestling with her own lapse from hope. Of course it was all coming right! She turned on the light, with a small trembling hand, and tried to read a newspaper Bridget had brought in. But the words swam before her; the paper dropped from her grasp; and when Bridget came back, her face was hidden, she seemed to be asleep.

'Is this it?' said Nelly, looking in alarm at the new and splendid house before which the taxi had drawn up.

'Well, it's the right number!' And Bridget, rather flurried, looked at the piece of paper on which Farrell had written the address for her, the night before.

She jumped out of the taxi and ran up some marble steps towards a glass door covered with a lattice metal-work, beyond which a hall, a marble staircase and a lift shewed dimly. Inside, a porter in livery, at the first sight of the taxi, put down the newspaper he was reading, and hurried to the door.

'Is this Sir William Farrell's flat?' asked Bridget.

'It's all right, Miss. They're expecting you. Sir William went off this morning. I was to tell you he had to go down to Aldershot to-day on business, but he hoped to look in this evening, on his way to Euston, to see that you had everything comfortable.'

Reluctantly, and with a feeble step, Nelly descended, helped by the porter.

'Oh, Bridget, I wish we hadn't come!' She breathed it into her sister's ear, as they stood together in the hall, waiting for the lift which had been called. Bridget shut her lips tightly, and said nothing.

The lift carried them up to the third floor, and there at the top the ex-army cook and his wife were waiting, a pair of stout and comfortable people, all smiles and complaisance. The two small trunks were shouldered by the man, and the woman led the way.

'Lunch will be ready directly, Ma'am,' she said to Nelly, who followed her in bewilderment across a hall panelled in marble and carpeted with something red and soft.

'Sir William thought you would like it about one o'clock. And this is your room, please, Ma'am —unless you would like anything different. It's Miss Farrell's room. She always likes the quiet side. And I've put Miss Cookson next door. I thought you'd wish to be together?'

Nelly entered a room furnished in white and pale green, luxurious in every detail, and hung with

engravings after Watteau framed in white wood. Through an open door shewed another room a little smaller, but equally dainty and fresh in all its appointments. Bridget tripped briskly through the open door, looked around her and deposited her bag upon the bed. Nelly meanwhile was being shewn the green-tiled and marble-floored bathroom attached to her room, Mrs. Simpson chattering on the various improvements and subtleties, which 'Miss Cicely' had lately commanded there.

'But I'm sure you'll be wanting your lunch, Ma'am,' said the woman at last, venturing a compassionate glance at the pale young creature beside her. 'It'll be ready in five minutes. I'll tell Simpson he can serve it.'

She disappeared, and Nelly sank into a chair. Why had they come to this place? Her whole nature was in revolt. The gaiety and luxury of the flat seemed to rise up and reproach her. What was she doing in such surroundings?—when George—Oh, it was hateful—hateful! She thought with longing of the little bare room in the Rydal lodgings, where they had been happy together.

'Well, are you ready?' said Bridget, bustling in. 'Do take off your things. You look absolutely done up!'

Nelly rose slowly, but her face had flushed.

'I can't stay here, Bridget!' she said with energy —'I can't! I don't know why we came.'

'Because we were asked,' said Bridget calmly.

'We can stay, I think, for a couple of days, can't we, till we find something else? Where are your brushes?'

And she began vigorously unpacking for her sister, helplessly watched by Nelly. They had just come from D—— Street, where Nelly had been shewn various letters and telegrams; but nothing which promised any real further clue to George Sarratt's fate. He had been seen advancing—seen wounded—by at least a dozen men of the regiment, and a couple of officers, all of whom had now been communicated with. But the wave of the counter-attack—temporarily successful—had rushed over the same ground before the British gains had been finally consolidated, and from that fierce and confused fighting there came no further word of George Sarratt. It was supposed that in the final German retreat he had been swept up as a German prisoner. He was not among the dead found and buried by an English search party on the following day—so much had been definitely ascertained.

The friendly volunteer in D—— Street—whose name appeared to be Miss Eustace—had tried to insist with Nelly that on the whole, and so far, the news collected was not discouraging. At least there was no verification of death. And for the rest, there were always the letters from Geneva to wait for. 'One must be patient,' Miss Eustace had said finally. 'These things take so long! But everybody's doing their best.' And she had grasped Nelly's cold hands

in hers, long and pityingly. Her own fine aquiline face seemed to have grown thinner and more strained even since Nelly had known it. She often worked in the office, she said, up to midnight.

All these recollections and passing visualisations of words and faces, drawn from those busy rooms a few streets off, in which not only George Sarratt's fate, but her own, as it often seemed to Nelly, were being slowly and inexorably decided, passed endlessly through her brain, as she mechanically took off her things, and brushed her hair.

Presently she was following Bridget across the hall to the drawing-room. Bridget seemed already to know all about the flat. 'The dining-room opens out of the drawing-room. It's all Japanese,' she said complaisantly, turning back to her sister. 'Isn't it jolly? Miss Farrell furnished it. Sir William let her have it all her own way.'

Nelly looked vaguely round the drawing-room, which had a blue Persian carpet, pale purple walls, hung with Japanese colour prints, a few chairs, one comfortable sofa, a couple of Japanese cabinets, and pots of Japanese lilies in the corners. It was a room not meant for living in. There was not a book in it anywhere. It looked exactly what it was—a perching-place for rich people, who liked their own ways, and could not be bored with hotels.

The dining-room was equally bare, costly, and effective. Its only ornament was a Chinese Buddha, a great terra-cotta, marvellously alive, which had

been looted from some Royal tomb, and now sat serenely out of place, looking over the dainty luncheon-table to the square outside, and wrapt in dreams older than Christianity.

The flat was nominally lent to 'Mrs. Sarratt,' but Bridget was managing everything, and had never felt so much in her element in her life. She sat at the head of the table, helped Nelly, gave all the orders, and was extraordinarily brisk and cheerful.

Nelly scarcely touched anything, and Mrs. Simpson who waited was much concerned.

'Perhaps you'd tell Simpson anything you could fancy, Madam,' she said anxiously in Nelly's ear, as she handed the fruit. Nelly must needs smile when anyone spoke kindly to her. She smiled now, though very wearily.

'Why, it's all beautiful, thank you. But I'm not hungry.'

'We'll have coffee in the drawing-room, please, Mrs. Simpson,' said Bridget rising—a tall masterful figure, in a black silk dress, which she kept for best occasions. 'Now Nelly, you must rest.'

Nelly let herself be put on the sofa in the drawing-room, and Bridget—after praising the coffee, the softness of the chairs, the beauty of the Japanese lilies, and much speculation on the value of the Persian carpet which, she finally decided, was old and priceless—announced that she was going for a walk.

'Why don't you come too, Nelly? Come and look at the shops. You shouldn't mope all day long.

If they do send for you to nurse George, you won't have the strength of a cat.'

But Nelly had shrunk into herself. She said she would stay in and write a letter to Hester Martin. Presently she was left alone. Mrs. Simpson had cleared away, and shut all the doors between the sitting-rooms and the kitchen. Inside the flat nothing was to be heard but the clock ticking on the drawing-room mantelpiece. Outside, there were intermittent noises and rattles from the traffic in the square, and beyond that again the muffled insistent murmur which seemed to Nelly this afternoon—in her utter loneliness—the most desolate sound she had ever heard. The day had turned to rain and darkness, and the rapid closing of the October afternoon prophesied winter. Nelly could not rouse herself to write the letter to Miss Martin. She lay prone in a corner of the sofa, dreaming, as she had done all her life; save that the faculty—of setting in motion at will a stream of vivid and connected images—which had always been one of her chief pleasures, was now an obsession and a torment. How often, in her wakeful nights at Rydal, had she lived over again every moment in the walk to Blea Tarn, till at last, gathered once more on George's knees, and nestling to his breast, she had fallen asleep—comforted.

She went through it all, once more, in this strange room, as the darkness closed; only the vision ended now, not in a tender thrill—half conscious, fading

into sleep—of remembered joy, but in an anguish of sobbing, the misery of the frail tormented creature, unable to bear its life.

Nevertheless sleep came. For nights she had scarcely slept, and in the silence immediately round her the distant sounds gradually lost their dreary note, and became a rhythmical and soothing influence. She fell into a deep unconsciousness.

An hour later, a tall man rang at the outer door of the flat. Mrs. Simpson obeyed the summons, and found Sir William Farrell on the threshold.

'Well, have they come?'

'Oh, yes, sir.' And Mrs. Simpson gave a rapid, *sotto voce* account of the visitors' arrival, their lunch, Mrs. Sarratt's sad looks—'poor little lady!'—and much else.

Sir William stepped in.

'Are they at home?'

Mrs. Simpson shook her head.

'They went out after lunch, Sir William, and I have not heard them come in.'

Which, of course, was a mistake on the part of Mrs. Simpson, who, hearing the front door close half an hour after luncheon and no subsequent movement in the flat, had supposed that the sisters had gone out together.

'All right. I'll wait for them. I want to see Mrs. Sarratt before I start. You may get me a cup of tea, if you like.'

Mrs. Simpson disappeared with alacrity, and Farrell crossed the hall to the drawing-room. He turned on the light as he opened the door, and was at once aware of Nelly's slight form on the sofa. She did not move, and something in her attitude—some rigidity that he fancied—alarmed him. He took a few steps, and then saw that there was no cause for alarm. She was only asleep, poor child, profoundly, pathetically asleep. Her utter unconsciousness, the delicate hand and arm lying over the edge of the sofa, and the gleam of her white forehead under its muffling cloud of hair, moved him strangely. He retreated as quietly as he could, and almost ran into Mrs. Simpson bringing a tray. He beckoned her into a small room which he used as his own den. But he had hardly explained the situation, before there were sounds in the drawing-room, and Nelly opened the door, which he had closed behind him. He had forgotten to turn out the light, and its glare had awakened her.

'Oh, Sir William—' she said, in bewilderment—'Did you come in just now?'

He explained his proceedings, retaining the hand she gave him, and looking down upon her with an impulsive and affectionate pity.

'You were asleep. I disturbed you,' he said, remorsefully.

'Oh no, do come in.'

She led the way into the drawing-room.

'I wanted—specially—to tell you some things I

heard at Aldershot to-day, which I thought might cheer you,' said Farrell.

And sitting beside her, while Mrs. Simpson lit a fire and spread a white tea-table, he repeated various stories of the safe return of 'missing' men which he had collected for her that morning, including the narrative of an escaped prisoner, who, although badly wounded, had managed to find his way back, at night, from the neighbourhood of Brussels, through various hairbreadth adventures and disguises, and after many weeks to the British lines. He brought the tale to her, as an omen of hope, together with his other gleanings; and under the influence of his cheerful voice and manner, Nelly's aspect changed; the light came back into her eyes, which hung upon him, as Farrell talked on, persuading himself, as he persuaded her. So that presently, when tea came in, and the kettle boiled, she was quite ready to pour out for him, to ask him questions about his night journey, and thank him timidly for all his kindness.

'But this—this is too grand for us!'—she said, looking round her. 'We must find a lodging soon.'

He begged her earnestly to let the flat be of use to her, and she, embarrassed and unwilling, but dreading to hurt his feelings, was compelled at last to submit to a week's stay.

Then he got up to go; and she was very sorry to say good-bye to him. As for him, in her wistful and gracious charm, she had never seemed to him

more lovely. How she became grief!—in her measure reserve!

He ran down the stairs of the mansion just as Bridget Cookson arrived with the lift at the third floor. She recognised the disappearing figure, and stood a moment at the door of the flat, looking after it, a gleam of satisfaction in her eyes.

PART II

CHAPTER IX

'IS she out?'

The questioner was William Farrell, and the question was addressed to his cousin Hester, whom he had found sitting in the little upstairs drawing-room of the Rydal lodgings, partly knitting, but mostly thinking, to judge from her slowly moving needles, and her absent eyes fixed upon the garden outside the open window.

'She has gone down to the lake—it is good for her to be alone a bit.'

'You brought her up from Torquay?'

'I did. We slept in London, and arrived yesterday. Miss Cookson comes this evening.'

'Why doesn't she keep away?' said Farrell, impatiently.

He took a seat opposite his cousin. He was in riding-dress, and looked in splendid case. From his boyhood he had always been coupled in Hester's mind with the Biblical words—'ruddy and of a cheerful countenance'; and as he sat there flushed with air and exercise, they fitted him even better than usual. Yet there was modern subtlety too in his restless eyes, and mouth alternately sensitive and ironic.

Hester's needles began to ply a little faster. A spring wind came through the window, and stirred her grey hair.

'How did she get over it yesterday?' Farrell presently asked.

'Well, of course it was hard,' said Hester, quietly. 'I let her alone, poor child, and I told Mrs. Weston not to bother her. She came up to these rooms and shut herself up a little. I went over to my own cottage, and came back for supper. Then she had got it over—and I just kissed her and said nothing. It was much best.'

'Do you think she gives up hope?'

Hester shook her head.

'Not the least. You can see that.'

'What do you mean?'

'When she gives up hope, she will put on a black dress.'

Farrell gave an impatient sigh.

'You know there can't be the smallest doubt that Sarratt is dead! He died in some German hospital, and the news has never come through.'

'The Red Cross people at Geneva declare that if he had died in hospital they would know. The identification disks are returned to them—so they say—with remarkable care.'

'Well then, he died on the field, and the Germans buried him.'

'In which case the poor soul will know nothing

—ever,' said Hester sadly. 'But, of course, she believes he is a prisoner.'

'My dear Hester, if he were, we should certainly have heard! Enquiries are now much more thorough, and the results much more accurate, than they were a year ago.'

'Loss of memory?—shell-shock?' said Hester vaguely.

'They don't do away with your disk, and your regimental marks, etc. Whatever may happen to a private, an officer doesn't slip through and vanish like this, if he is still alive. The thing is perfectly clear.'

Hester shook her head without speaking. She was just as thoroughly convinced as Farrell that Nelly was a widow; but she did not see how anybody could proclaim it before Nelly did.

'I wonder how long it will take to convince her,' said Farrell, after a pause.

'Well, I suppose when peace comes, if there's no news then, she will have to give it up. By the way, when may one—legally—presume that one's husband is dead?' asked Hester, suddenly lifting her shrewd grey eyes to the face of her visitor.

'It used to be seven years. But I believe now you can go to the Courts——'

'If a woman wants to remarry? Well that, of course, Nelly Sarratt will never do!'

'My dear Hester, what nonsense!' said Farrell,

vehemently. 'Of course she'll marry again. What is she?—twenty-one? It would be a sin and a shame.'

'I only meant she would never take any steps of her own will to separate herself from Sarratt.'

'Women look at things far too sentimentally!' exclaimed Farrell, 'and they just spoil their lives. However, neither you nor I can prophesy anything. Time works wonders; and if he didn't, we should all be wrecks and lunatics!'

Hester said nothing. She was conscious of suppressed excitement in the man before her. Farrell watched her knitting fingers for a little, and then remarked:—

'But of course at present what has to be done, is to improve her health, and distract her thoughts.'

Hester's eyes lifted again.

'And *you* want to take it in hand?'

Her emphasis on the pronoun was rather sharp. Farrell's fair though sunburnt skin shewed a sudden redness.

'Yes, I do. Why shouldn't I?' His look met hers full.

'She's very lonely—very unprotected,' said Hester, slowly.

'You mean, you can't trust me?' he said, flushing deeper.

'No, Willy—no!' Hester's earnest, perplexed look appeased his rising anger. 'But it's a very difficult position, you must see for yourself. Ever

since George Sarratt disappeared, you've been—what shall I say?—the poor child's earthly Providence. Her illness—her convalescence—you've done everything—you've provided everything——'

'With her sister's consent, remember!—and I promised Sarratt to look after them!'

Farrell's blue eyes were now bright and stubborn. Hester realised him as ready for an argument which both he and she had long foreseen. She and Farrell had always been rather intimate friends, and he had come to her for advice in some very critical moments of his life.

'Her sister!' repeated Hester, contemptuously. 'Yes, indeed, Bridget Cookson—in my opinion—is a great deal too ready to accept everything you do! But Nelly has fought it again and again. Only, in her weakness, with you on one side—and Bridget on the other—what could she do?'

She had taken the plunge now. Her own colour had risen—her hand shook a little on her needles. And she had clearly roused some strong emotion in Farrell. After a few moments' silence, he fell upon her, speaking rather huskily.

'You mean I have taken advantage of her?'

'I don't mean anything of the kind!' Hester's tone shewed her distress. 'I know that all you have done has been out of pure friendship and goodness——'

He stopped her.

'Don't go on!' he said roughly. 'Whatever I

am, I'm not a hypocrite. I worship the ground she treads on!'

There was silence. Hester bent again over her work. The thoughts of both flew back over the preceding six months. Nelly's utter collapse after five or six weeks in London, when the closest enquiries, backed by Farrell's intelligence, influence and money —he had himself sent out a special agent to Geneva—had failed to reveal the slightest trace of George Sarratt; her illness, pneumonia, the result of a slight chill affecting a general physical state depressed by grief and sleeplessness; her long and tedious convalescence; and that pitiful dumbness and inertia from which she had only just begun to emerge. Hester was thinking too of the nurses, the doctors, the lodgings at Torquay, the motor, the endless flowers and books!—all provided, practically, by Farrell, aided and abetted by Bridget's readiness—a discreditable readiness, in the eyes of a person of such Spartan standards as Hester Martin—to avail herself to any extent of other people's money. The patient was not to blame. Even in the worst times of her illness, Nelly had shewn signs of distress and revolt. But Bridget, instructed by Farrell, had talked vaguely of 'a loan from a friend'; and Nelly had been too ill, too physically weak, to urge enquiry further.

Seeing that he was to blame, Farrell broke in upon Hester's recollections.

'You know very well'—he said vehemently—

'that if anything less had been done for her, she would have died!'

Would she? It was the lavishness and costliness of Farrell's giving which had shocked Hester's sense of delicacy, and had given rise—she was certain—to gossip among the Farrell friends and kindred that could easily have been avoided. She looked at her companion steadily.

'Suppose we grant it, Willy. But now she's convalescent, she's going to get strong. Let her live her own life. You can't marry her—and'—she added it deliberately—'she is as much in love with her poor George as she ever was!'

Farrell moved restlessly in his chair. She saw him wince—and she had intended the blow.

'I can't marry her—yet—perhaps for years. But why can't I be her friend? Why can't I share with her the things that give me pleasure—books—art—and all the rest? Why should you condemn me to see her living on a pittance, with nobody but a sister who is as hard as nails to look after her?—lonely, and unhappy, and dull—when I know that I could help her, turn her mind away from her trouble—make her take some pleasure in life again? You talk, Hester, as though we had a dozen lives to play with, instead of this one rickety business!'

His resentment grew with the expression of it. But Hester met him unflinchingly.

'I'm anxious—because human nature is human nature—and risk is risk,' she said slowly.

He bent forward, his hands on his knees.

'I swear to you I will be honestly her friend! What do you take me for, Hester? You know very well that—I have had my adventures, and they're over. I'm not a boy. I can answer for myself.'

'All very well!—but suppose—*suppose*—before she felt herself free—and against her conscience—*she* were to fall in love with *you?*'

Farrell could not conceal the flash that the mere words, reluctantly as they were spoken, sent through his blue eyes. He laughed.

'Well—you're there! Act watch-dog as much as you please. Besides—we all know—you have just said so—that she does not believe in Sarratt's death, that she feels herself still his wife, and not his widow. That fact establishes the relation between her and me. And if the outlook changes——'

His voice dropped to a note of pleading—

'Let me, Hester!—let me!'

'As if I could prevent you!' said Hester, rather bitterly, bending again over her work.

'Yes, you could. You have such influence with her now, that you could banish me entirely if you pleased. A word from you would do it. But it would be hideously cruel of you—and abominally unjust! However, I know your power—over her—and so over me. And so I made up my mind it was no good trying to conceal anything from you. I've told you straight out. I love her—and because I

love her—you may be perfectly certain I shall protect her!'

Silence again. Farrell had turned towards the open window. When Hester turned her eyes she saw his handsome profile, his Nibelung's head and beard against the stony side of the fell. A man with unfair advantages, it seemed to her, if he chose to put out his strength;—the looks of a king, a warm heart, a sympathetic charm, felt quite as much by men as by women, and ability which would have distinguished him in any career, if his wealth had not put the drag on industry. But at the moment he was not idle. He was more creditably and fully employed then she had ever known him. His hospital and his pride in it were in fact Nelly Sarratt's best safeguard. Whatever he wished, he could not possibly spend all his time at her feet.

Hester tried one more argument—the conventional.

'Have you ever really asked yourself, Willy, how it will look to the outside world—what people will think? It is all very well to scoff at Mrs. Grundy, but the poor child has no natural guardian. We both agree her sister is no use to her.'

'Let them think!'—he turned to her again with energy—'so long as you and I *know*. Besides—I shan't compromise her in any way. I shall be most careful not to do so.'

'Look at this room!' said Hester drily. She

herself surveyed it. Farrell's laugh had a touch of embarrassment.

'Well?—mayn't anyone give things to a sick child? Hush!—here she is!'

He drew further back into the room, and they both watched a little figure in a serge dress crossing the footbridge beyond the garden. Then she came into the garden, and up the sloping lawn, her hat dangling in her hand, and the spring sunshine upon her. Hester thought of the preceding June; of the little bride, with her springing step, and radiant eyes. Nelly, as she was now, seemed to her the typical figure—or rather, one of the two typical figures of the war—the man in action, the woman in bereavement. Sorrow had marked her; bitten into her youth, and blurred it. Yet it had also dignified and refined her. She was no less lovely.

As she approached, she saw them and waved to them. Farrell went to the sitting-room door to meet her, and it seemed both to him and Hester that in spite of her emaciation and her pallor, she brought the spring in with her. She had a bunch of willow catkins and primroses in her hand, and her face, for all its hollow cheeks and temples, shewed just a sparkle of returning health.

It was clear that she was pleased to see Farrell. But her manner of greeting him now was very different from what it had been in the days before her loss. It was much quieter and more assured. His seniority —there were nineteen years between them—his con-

spicuous place in the world, his knowledge and accomplishment, had evidently ceased to intimidate her. Something had equalised them.

But his kindness could still make her shy.

Half-way across the room, she caught sight of a picture, on an easel, both of which Farrell had brought with him.

'Oh!——' she said, and stopped short, looking from it to him.

He enjoyed her surprise.

'Well? Do you remember admiring it at the cottage? I'm up to the neck in work. I never go there. I thought you and Hester might as well take care of it for a bit.'

Nelly approached it. It was one of the Turner water-colours which glorified the cottage; the most adorable, she thought, of all of them. It shewed a sea of downs, their grassy backs flowing away wave after wave, down to the real sea in the gleaming distance. Between the downs ran a long valley floor —cottages on it, woods and houses, farms and churches, strung on a silver river; under the mingled cloud and sunshine of an April day. It breathed the very soul of England,—of this sacred long-descended land of ours. Sarratt, who had stood beside her when she had first looked at it, had understood it so at once.

'Jolly well worth fighting for—this country! isn't it?' he had said to Farrell over her head, and once or twice afterwards he had spoken to her of the draw-

ing with delight. 'I shall think of it—over there. It'll do one good.'

As she paused before it now, a sob rose in her throat. But she controlled herself quickly. Then something beyond the easel caught her eye—a mass of flowers, freesias, narcissus, tulips, tumbled on a table; then a pile of new books; and finally, a surprising piece of furniture.

'What have you been doing now?' she asked him, wondering, and, as Hester thought, shrinking back a little.

'It's from Cicely'—he said apologetically. 'She made me bring it. She declared she'd sampled the sofa here,—' he pointed to an ancient one in a corner —' and it would disgrace a dug-out. It's her affair—don't blame me!'

Nelly looked bewildered.

'But I'm not ill now. I'm getting well.'

'If you only knew what a ghost you look still,' he said vehemently, 'you'd let Cicely have her little plot. This used to stand in my mother's sitting-room. It was bought for her. Cicely had it put to rights.'

As he spoke, he made a hasty mental note that Cicely would have to be coached in her part.

Nelly examined the object. It was a luxurious adjustable couch, covered in flowery chintz, with a reading-desk, and well supplied with the softest cushions.

She laughed, but there was rather a flutter in her laugh.

'It's awfully kind of Cicely. But you know——'

Her eyes turned on Farrell with a sudden insistence. Hester had just left the room, and her distant voice—with other voices—could be heard in the garden.

'——You know you mustn't—all of you—spoil me so, any more. I've got my life to face. You mean it so kindly—but——'

She sank into a chair by the window that Farrell had placed for her, and her aspect struck him painfully. There was so much weakness in it; and yet a touch of fierceness.

'I've got my life to face,' she repeated—'and you mustn't, Sir William—you *mustn't* let me get too dependent on you—and Cicely—and Hester. Be my friend—my true friend—and help me——'

She bent forward, and her pale lips just breathed the rest—

'Help me—*to endure hardness!* That's what I want—for George's sake—and my own. I must find some work to do. In a few months perhaps I might be able to teach—but there are plenty of things I could do now. I want to be just—neglected a little—treated as a normal person!'

She smiled faintly at him as he stood beside her. He felt himself rebuked—abashed—as though he had been in some sort an intruder on her spiritual freedom; had tried to purchase her dependence by

a kindness she did not want. That was not in her mind, he knew. But it was in Hester's. And there was not wanting a certain guilty consciousness in his own.

But he threw it off. Absurdity! She *did* need his friendship; and he had done what he had done without the shadow of a corrupt motive—*en tout bien, tout honneur.*

It was intolerable to him to think of her as poor and resourceless—left to that disagreeable sister and her own melancholy thoughts. Still the first need of all was that she should trust him—as a good friend, who had slipped by force of circumstances into a kind of guardian's position. Accordingly he applied himself to the kind of persuasion that befits seniority and experience. She had asked to be treated as a normal person. He proved to her, gently laughing at her, that the claim was preposterous. Ask her doctor!—ask Hester! As for teaching, time enough to talk about that when she had a little flesh on her bones, a little strength in her limbs. She might read, of course; that was what the couch was for. Lying there by the window she might become as learned as she liked, and get strong at the same time. He would keep her stocked with books. The library at Carton was going mouldy for lack of use. And as for her drawing, he had hoped —perhaps—she might some time take a lesson——

Then he saw a little shiver run through her.

'Could I?' she said in a low voice, turning her

face away. And he perceived that the bare idea of resuming old pleasures—the pleasures of her happy, her unwidowed time—was still a shock to her.

'I'm sure it would help'—he said, persevering. 'You have a real turn for water-colour. You should cultivate it—you should really. In my belief you might do a great deal better with it than with teaching.'

That roused her. She sat up, her eyes brightening.

'If I *worked*—you really think? And then,' her voice dropped—'if George came back——'

'Exactly,' he said gravely—'it might be of great use. Didn't you wish for something normal to do? Well, here's the chance. I can supply you with endless subjects to copy. There are more in the cottage than you would get through in six months. And I could send you over portfolios of my own studies and *académies,* done at Paris, and in the Slade, which would help you—and sometimes we could take some work out of doors.'

She said nothing, but her sad puzzled eyes, as they wandered over the garden and the lake, shewed that she was considering it.

Then suddenly her expression changed.

'Isn't that Cicely's voice?' She motioned towards the garden.

'I daresay. I sent on the motor to meet her at Windermere. She's been in town for two or three weeks, selling at Red Cross Bazaars and things. And by George!—isn't that Marsworth?'

He sprang up to look, and verified his guess. The tall figure on the lawn with Cicely and Hester was certainly Marsworth. He and Nelly looked at each other, and Nelly smiled.

'You know Cicely and I have become great friends?' she said shyly. 'It's so odd that I should call her Cicely—but she makes me.'

'She treats you nicely?—at last?'

'She's awfully good to me,' said Nelly, with emphasis. 'I used to be so afraid of her.'

'What wrought the miracle?'

But Nelly shook her head, and would not tell.

'I had a letter from Marsworth a week ago,' said Farrell reflecting—'asking how and where we all were. I told him I was tied and bound to Carton—no chance of getting away for ages—but that Cicely had kicked over the traces and gone up to London for a month. Then he sent a post-card to say that he was coming up for a fortnight's treatment, and would go to his old quarters at the Rectory. Ah!——'

He paused, grinning. The same thought occurred to both of them. Marsworth was still suffering very much at times from his neuralgia in the arm, and had a great belief in one of the Carton surgeons, who, with Farrell's aid, had now installed one of the most complete electrical and gymnastic apparatus in the kingdom, at the Carton hospital. Once, during an earlier absence of Cicely's before Christmas, he had suddenly appeared at the Rectory, for

ten days' treatment; and now—again! Farrell laughed.

'As for Cicely, you can never count on her for a week together. She got home-sick, and wired to me that she was coming to-night. I forgot all about Marsworth. I expect they met at the station; and quarrelled all the way here. What on earth is Cicely after in that direction! You say you've made friends with her. Do you know?'

Nelly looked conscious.

'I—I guess something,' she said.

'But you mustn't tell?'

She nodded, smiling. Farrell shrugged his shoulders.

'Well, am I to encourage Marsworth—supposing he comes to me for advice—to go and propose to the Rector's granddaughter?'

'Certainly not!' said Nelly, opening a pair of astonished eyes.

'Aha, I've caught you! You've given the show away. But you know'—his tone grew serious—'it's not at all impossible that he may. She torments him too much.'

'He must do nothing of the kind,' said Nelly, with decision.

'Well, you tell him so. I wash my hands of them. I can't fathom either of them. Here they are!'

Voices ascending the stairs announced the party. Cicely came in first; tired and travel-stained, and

apparently in the worst of tempers. But she seemed glad to see Nelly Sarratt, whom she kissed, to the astonishment of her Cousin Hester, who was not as yet aware of the new relations between the two. And then, flinging herself into a chair beside Nelly, she declared that she was dead-beat, that the train had been intolerably full of khaki, and that soldiers ought to have trains to themselves.

'Thank your stars, Cicely, that you are allowed to travel at all,' said Farrell. 'No civilian nowadays matters a hap'orth.'

'And then we talk about Prussian Militarism!' cried Cicely. And she went off at score describing the invasion of her compartment at Rugby by a crowd of young officers, whose manners were 'atrocious.'

'What was their crime?' asked Marsworth, quietly. He sat in the background, cigarette in hand, a strong figure, rather harshly drawn, black hair slightly grizzled, a black moustache, civilian clothes. He had filled out since the preceding summer and looked much better in health. But his left arm was still generally in its sling.

'They had every crime!' said Cicely impatiently. 'It isn't worth discriminating.'

Marsworth raised his eyebrows.

'Poor boys!'

Cicely flushed.

'You think, of course, I have no right to criticise anything in khaki!'

'Not at all. Criticism is the salt of life.' His eyes twinkled.

'That I entirely deny!' said Cicely, firmly. She made a fantastic but agreeable figure as she sat near the window in the full golden light of the March evening. Above her black toque there soared a feather which almost touched the ceiling of the low room—a *panache,* nodding defiance; while her short grey skirts shewed her shapely ankles and feet, clothed in grey gaiters and high boots of the very latest perfection.

'What do you deny, Cicely?' asked her brother, absently, conscious always, through all the swaying of talk, of the slight childish form of Nelly Sarratt beneath him, in her deep chair; and of the eyes and mouth, which after the few passing smiles he had struck from them, were veiled again in their habitual sadness. *'Here I and sorrow sit.'* The words ran through his mind, only to be passionately rejected. She was young!—and life was long. Forget she would, and must.

At her brother's question, Cicely merely shrugged her shoulders.

'Your sister was critical,' said Marsworth, laughing,—'and then denies the uses of criticism.'

'As some people employ it!' said Cicely, pointedly.

Marsworth's mouth twitched—but he said nothing.

Then Hester, perceiving that the atmosphere was

stormy, started some of the usual subjects that relieve tension; the weather—the possibility of a rush of Easter tourists to the Lakes—the daffodils that were beginning to make beauty in some sheltered places. Marsworth assisted her; while Cicely took a chair beside Nelly, and talked exclusively to her, in a low voice. Presently Hester saw their hands slip together—Cicely's long and vigorous fingers enfolding Nelly's thin ones. How had two such opposites ever come to make friends? The kindly old maid was very conscious of cross currents in the spiritual air, as she chatted to Marsworth. She was keenly aware of Farrell, and could not keep the remembrance of what he had said to her out of her mind. Nelly's face and form, also, as the twilight veiled them, were charged for Hester with pitiful meaning. While at the back of her thoughts there was an expectation, a constant and agitating expectation, of another arrival. Bridget Cookson might be upon them at any moment. To Hester Martin she was rapidly becoming a disquieting and sinister element in this group of people. Yet why, Hester could not really have explained.

The afternoon was rapidly drawing in, and Farrell was just beginning to take out his watch, and talk of starting home, when the usual clatter of wheels and hoofs announced the arrival of the evening coach. Nelly sat up, looking very white and weary.

'I am expecting my sister,' she said to Farrell. 'She has no doubt come by this coach.'

And in a few more minutes, Bridget was in the room, distributing to everybody there the careless staccato greetings which were her way of protecting herself against the world. Her entrance and her manner had always a disintegrating effect upon other human beings; and Bridget had no sooner shaken hands with the Farrells than everybody—save Nelly—was upon their feet and ready to move. One of Bridget's most curious and marked characteristics was an unerring instinct for whatever news might be disagreeable to the company in which she found herself; and on this occasion she brought some bad war news—a German advance at Verdun, with corresponding French losses—and delivered it with the emphasis of one to whom it was not really unwelcome. Cicely, to whom, flourishing her evening paper, she had mainly addressed herself, listened with the haughty and casual air she generally put on for Bridget Cookson. She had succumbed for her own reasons to the charm of Nelly. She was only the more inclined to be rude to Bridget. Accordingly she professed complete incredulity on the subject of the news. 'Invented,'—she supposed—'to sell some halfpenny rag or other. It would all be contradicted to-morrow.' Then when Bridget, smarting under so much scepticism, attempted to support her tale by the testimony of various stale morsels of military gossip, current in a certain pessimist and pacifist household she had been visiting in Manchester, as to the unfavourable situation in France, and

the dead certainty of the loss of Verdun; passing glibly on to the 'bad staff work' on the British side, and the 'poor quality of the new officers compared to the old,' etc.—Cicely visibly turned up her nose, and with a few deft, cat-like strokes put a raw provincial in her place. She, Cicely, of course—she made it plain, by a casual hint or two—had just come from the very centre of things; from living on a social diet of nothing less choice than Cabinet Ministers and leading Generals—Bonar Law, Asquith, Curzon, Briand, Lloyd George, Thomas, the great Joffre himself. Bridget began to scowl a little, and had it been anyone else than Cicely Farrell who was thus chastising her, would soon have turned her back upon them. For she was no indiscriminate respecter of persons, and cared nothing at all about rank or social prestige. But from a Farrell she took all things patiently; till Cicely, suddenly discovering that her victim was giving her no sport, called peremptorily to 'Willy' to help her put on her cloak. But Farrell was having some last words with Nelly, and Marsworth came forward—

'Let me——'

'Oh thank you!' said Cicely carelessly, 'I can manage it myself.' And she did not allow him to touch it.

Marsworth retreated, and Hester, who had seen the little incident, whispered indignantly in her cousin's ear—

'Cicely!—you are a wicked little wretch!'

But Cicely only laughed, and her feather made defiant nods and flourishes all the way downstairs.

'Come along Marsworth, my boy,' said Farrell when the good-byes were said, and Hester stood watching their departure, while Cicely chattered from the motor, where she sat wrapped in furs against a rising east wind. 'Outside—or inside?' He pointed to the car.

'Outside, thank you,' said Marsworth, with decision. He promptly took his place beside the chauffeur, and Farrell and his sister were left to each other's company. Farrell had seldom known his companion more cross and provoking than she was during the long motor ride home; and on their arrival at Carton she jumped out of the car, and with barely a nod to Marsworth, vanished into the house.

Meanwhile Nelly had let Hester install her on the Carton couch, and lay there well shawled, beside the window, her delicate face turned to the lake and the mountains. Bridget was unpacking, and Hester was just departing to her own house. Nelly could hardly let her go. For a month now, Hester had been with her at Torquay, while Bridget was pursuing some fresh 'work' in London. And Nelly's desolate heart had found both calm and bracing in Hester's tenderness. For the plain shapeless spinster was one of those rare beings who in the Lampadephoria of life, hand on the Lamp of Love, pure and undefiled,

as they received it from men and women, like themselves, now dead.

But Hester went at last, and Nelly was alone. The lake lay steeped in a rich twilight, into which the stars were rising. The purple breast of Silver How across the water breathed of shelter, of rest, of things ineffable. Nelly's eyes were full of tears, and her hands clasped on her breast scarcely kept down the sobbing. There, under the hands, was the letter which George had written to her, the night before he left her. She had been told of its existence within a few days of his disappearance; and though she longed for it, a stubborn instinct had bade her refuse to have it, refuse to open it. 'No!—I was only to open it, if George was dead. And he is not dead!' And as time went on, it had seemed to her for months, as if to open it, would be in some mysterious way to seal his fate. But at last she had sent for it—at last she had read it—with bitter tears.

She would wear no black for him—her lost lover. She told herself to hope still. But she was, in truth, beginning to despair. And into her veins, all unconsciously, as into those of the old brown earth, the tides of youth, the will to live, were slowly, slowly, surging back.

CHAPTER X

'YOU have gone far enough,' said Cicely imperiously. 'I am going to take you home.'

'Let me sit a little first. It's all so lovely.

Nelly dropped into the soft springy turf, dried by a mild east wind, and lay curled up under a rock, every tremulous nerve in her still frail body played on by the concert of earth and sky before her. It was May; the sky was china-blue, and the clouds sailed white upon it. The hawthorns too were white upon the fell-side, beside the ageing gold of the gorse, while below, the lake lay like roughened silver in its mountain cup, and on the sides of Nab Scar, below the screes, the bronze of the oaks ran in and out among the feathery green of the larch plantations, or the flowering grass of the hay-meadows dropping to the lake. The most spiritual moment of the mountain spring was over. This was earth in her moment of ferment, rushing towards the fruition of summer.

Nelly's youth was keenly, automatically conscious of the physical pleasure of the day; except indeed for recurrent moments, when that very pleasure revived the sharpness of grief. Soon it would be the anniversary of her wedding day. Every hour of that day, and of the honeymoon bliss which followed

it, seemed to be still so close to her. Surely she had only to put out her hand to find his, and all the horror and the anguish swept away. Directly she shut her eyes on this spring scene, she was in that other life, which had been, and therefore must still be.

But she had not been talking of him with Cicely. She very seldom talked of him now, or of the past. She kept up correspondence with half a dozen men of his company—the brother officer to whom Sarratt had given his last letter—a sergeant, and three or four privates, who had written to her about him. She had made friends with them all, especially with the young lieutenant. They seemed to like hearing from her; and she followed all their migrations and promotions with a constant sympathy. One of them had just written to her from a hospital at Boulogne. He had been seriously wounded in a small affair near Festubert early in May. He was getting better he said, but he hardly cared whether he recovered or not. Everybody he cared for in the regiment had 'gone west' in the fighting of the preceding month. No big push either,—just many little affairs that came to nothing—it was 'damned luck!' There was one of his officers that he couldn't get over—he couldn't get over 'Mr. Edward' being killed. He—the writer—had been Mr. Edward's servant for a month or two—having known his people at home—and a nicer young fellow never stepped. 'When I go back, I'm going to look for Mr. Edward—they say he was

buried close to the trenches where he fell, and I'm going to put him in some quiet place; and then when the war's over we can bring him back to Baston Magna, and lay him with his own people in Baston churchyard.'

'I wonder who Mr. Edward was,' said Nelly to herself, with half shut eyes. She had entirely forgotten Cicely's neighbourhood. But Cicely turned round, and asked her what she was thinking of. Nelly repeated the letter, and Cicely suddenly shewed agitation—'Edward!—Baston Magna!—he means Edward Longmore!'

Cicely rarely cried. When she was moved, she had a way of turning a grey-white, and speaking with particular deliberation, as though every word were an effort. Of late, for some mysterious reason, she only indulged occasionally in 'make-up'; there was no rouge, at any rate, on this afternoon, to disguise her change of colour. She looked oddly at Nelly.

'I danced with him at Christmas,' she said. 'There was a very smart party at a house in Grosvenor Square. The Prince was there, home on short leave, and about twenty young men in khaki, and twenty girls. Edward Longmore was there—he wrote to me afterwards. Oh, he was much younger than I. He was the dearest, handsomest, bravest little fellow. When I saw his name in the list—I just'—she ground her small white teeth—'I just *cursed* the war! Do you know'—she rolled over on

the grass beside Nelly, her chin in her hands—'the July before the war, I used to play tennis in a garden near London. There were always five or six boys hanging about there—jolly handsome boys, with everything that anybody could want—family, and money, and lots of friends—all the world before them. And there's not one of them left. They're all *dead—dead!* Think of that! Boys of twenty and twenty-one. What'll the girls do they used to play and dance with? All their playfellows are gone. They can't marry—they'll never marry. It hadn't anything to do with me, of course. I'm twenty-eight. I felt like a mother to them! But I shan't marry either!'

Nelly didn't answer for a moment. Then she put out a hand and turned Cicely's face towards her.

'Where is he?—and what is he doing?' she said, half laughing, but always with that something behind her smile which seemed to set her apart.

Cicely sat up.

'He? Oh, that gentleman! Well, *he* has got some fresh work—just the work he wanted, he says, in the Intelligence Department, and he writes to Willy that life is "extraordinarily interesting," and he's "glad to have lived to see this thing, horrible as it is."'

'Well, you wouldn't wish him to be miserable?'

'I should have no objection at all to his being miserable,' said Cicely calmly, 'but I am not such a

fool as to suppose that I should ever know it, if he were.'

'Cicely!'

Cicely took up a stalk of grass, and began to bite it. Her eyes seemed on fire. Nelly was suddenly aware of the flaming up of fierce elemental things in this fashionably dressed young woman whose time was oddly divided between an important share in the running of her brother's hospital, and a hungry search after such gaieties as a world at war might still provide her with. She could spend one night absorbed in some critical case, and eagerly rendering the humblest V.A.D. service to the trained nurses whom her brother paid; and the next morning she would travel to London in order to spend the second night in one of those small dances at great houses of which she had spoken to Nelly, where the presence of men just come from, or just departing to, the firing line lent a zest to the talk and the flirting, the jealousies and triumphs of the evening that the dances of peace must do without. Then after a morning of wild spending in the shops she would take a midday train back to Cumberland and duty.

Nelly, looking at her, wondered afresh how they had ever come to be friends. Yet they were friends, and her interest in Cicely's affairs was one of the slender threads drawing her back to life.

It had all happened when she was ill at the flat; after that letter from the Geneva Red Cross which

reported that in spite of exhaustive enquiries among German hospitals, and in the prisoners' camps no trace of Lieutenant Sarratt could be found. On the top of the letter, and the intolerable despair into which it had plunged her, had come influenza. There was no doubt—Nelly's recollection faced it candidly—that she would have come off badly but for Cicely. Bridget had treated the illness on the hardening plan, being at the moment slightly touched with Christian Science. Nelly should 'think it away.' To stay in bed and give in was folly. She meanwhile had found plenty to do in London, and was away for long hours. In one of these absences, Cicely—having been seized with a sudden hunger for the flesh-pots of 'town'—appeared at the flat with her maid. She discovered Nelly Sarratt in bed, and so weak as to be hardly capable of answering any question. Mrs. Simpson was doing her best; but she gave an indignant account of Bridget's behaviour, and Cicely at once took a strong line, both as a professional nurse—of sorts—and as mistress of the flat. Bridget, grimly defensive, was peremptorily put on one side, and Cicely devoted the night she was to have spent in dancing to tending her half-conscious guest. In the days that followed she fell, quite against her will, under the touching charm of Nelly's refinement, humility and sweetness. Her own trenchant and masterful temper was utterly melted, for the time, by Nelly's helpless state, by the grief which threatened to kill her, and by a gratefulness for any kind-

ness shewn her, which seemed to Cicely almost absurd.

She fell in love—impetuously—with the little creature thus thrown upon her pity. She sent for a trained nurse and their own doctor. She wired for Hester Martin, and in forty-eight hours Bridget had been entirely ousted, and Nelly's state had begun to shew signs of improvement. Bridget took the matter stoically. 'I know nothing about nursing,' she said, with composure. 'If you wish to look after my sister, by all means look after her. Many thanks. I propose to go and stay near the British Museum, and will look in here when I can.'

So she departed, and Cicely stayed in London for three weeks until Nelly was strong enough to go to Torquay. Then, reluctantly, she gave up her charge to Bridget, she being urgently wanted at Carton, and Hester at Rydal. Bridget reappeared on the scene with the same sangfroid as she had left it. She had no intention of quarrelling with the Farrells whatever they might do; and in an eminently satisfactory interview with Sir William—quite unknown to Nelly—she allowed him to give her a cheque which covered all their expenses at Torquay.

Meanwhile Nelly had discovered Cicely's secret—which indeed was not very secret. Captain Marsworth had appeared in London for the purpose of attending his Medical Board, and called at the flat. Nelly was by that time on the sofa, with Cicely keeping guard, and Nelly could sometimes deaden her

own consciousness for a little in watching the two. What were they after? Marsworth's ethical enthusiasms and resentments, the prophetic temper that was growing upon him in relation to the war, his impatience of idleness and frivolity and 'slackness,' of all modes of life that were not pitched in a key worthy of that continuous sacrifice of England's youngest and noblest that was going on perpetually across the Channel:—these traits in him made it very easy to understand why, after years of philandering with Cicely Farrell, he was now, apparently, alienated from her, and provoked by her. But then, why did he still pursue her?—why did he still lay claim to the privileges of their old intimacy, and why did Cicely allow him to do so?

At last one evening, after a visit from Marsworth which had been one jar from beginning to end, Cicely had suddenly dropped on a stool, beside Nelly on the sofa.

'What an intolerable man!' she said with crimson cheeks. 'Shall I tell Simpson not to let him in again?'

Nelly looked her surprise, for as yet there had been no confidence on this subject between them. And then had come a torrent—Cicely walking stormily up and down the room, and pouring out her soul.

The result of which outpouring was that through all the anger and denunciation, Nelly very plainly perceived that Cicely was a captured creature, en-

deavouring to persuade herself that she was still free. She loved Marsworth—and hated him. She could not make up her mind to give up for his sake the 'lust of the eye and the pride of life,' as he clearly would endeavour to make her give them up, the wild bursts of gaiety and flirting for which she periodically rushed up to town, the passion for dress, the reckless extravagance with which it pleased her to shock him whenever they met. And he also—so it seemed to Nelly—was torn by contradictory feelings. As soon as Cicely was within reach, he could not keep away from her; and yet when confronted with her, and some new vagary, invented probably to annoy him, though he might refrain 'even from good words,' his critical mouth and eye betrayed him, and set the offender in a fury.

However, it was the quarrels between these two strange lovers, if they were lovers, that had made a friendship, warm and real—on Cicely's side even impassioned—between Nelly and Cicely. For Cicely had at last found someone—not of her own world—to whom she could talk in safety. Yet she had treated the Sarratts cavalierly to begin with, just because they were outsiders, and because 'Willy' was making such a fuss with them; for she was almost as easily jealous in her brother's case as in Marsworth's. But now Nelly's sad remoteness from ordinary life, her very social insignificance, and the lack of any links between her and the great Farrell kinship of relations and friends, made her company,

and her soft, listening ways specially welcome and soothing to Cicely's excited mood.

During the latter half of the winter they had corresponded, though Cicely was the worst of letter-writers; and since Nelly and her sister had been in Rydal again there had been constant meetings. Nelly's confidences in return for Cicely's were not many nor frequent. The effects of grief were to be seen in her aspect and movements, in her most pathetic smile, in her increased dreaminess, and the inertia against which she struggled in vain. Since May began, she had for the first time put on black. Nobody had dared to speak to her about it, so sharply did the black veil thrown back from the childish brow intensify the impression that she made, as of something that a touch might break. But the appearance of the widow's dress seemed to redouble the tenderness with which every member of the little group of people among whom she lived treated her—always excepting her sister. Nelly had in vain protested to Farrell against the 'spoiling' of which she was the object. 'Spoiled' she was, and it was clear both to Hester and Cicely, after a time, that though she had the will, she had not the strength to resist.

Unless on one point. She had long since stopped all subsidies of money from Farrell through Bridget, having at last discovered the plain facts about them. Her letter of thanks to him for all he had done for her was at once so touching and so determined, that

he had not dared since to cross her will. All that he now found it possible to urge was that the sisters would allow him to lend them a vacant farmhouse of his, not far from the Loughrigg Tarn cottage. Nelly had been so far unwilling; it was clear that her heart clung to the Rydal lodgings. But Hester and Cicely were both on Farrell's side. The situation of the farm was higher and more bracing than Rydal; and both Cicely and Farrell cherished the notion of making it a home for Nelly, until indeed—

At this point Farrell generally succeeded in putting a strong rein upon his thoughts, as part of the promise he had made to Hester. But Cicely, who was much cooler and more matter of fact than her brother, had long since looked further ahead. Willy was in love, irrevocably in love with Nelly Sarratt. That had been plain to her for some time. Before those days in the flat, when she herself had fallen in love with Nelly, and before the disappearance of George Sarratt, she had resented Willy's absurd devotion to a little creature who, for all her beauty, seemed to Cicely merely an insignificant member of the middle classes, with a particularly impossible sister. And as to the notion that Mrs. Sarratt might become at some distant period her brother's wife, Lady Farrell of Carton, Cicely would have received it with scorn, and fought the realisation of it tooth and nail. Yet now all the 'Farrell feeling,' the Farrell pride, in this one instance, at any rate,

was gone. Why? Cicely didn't know. She supposed first because Nelly was such a dear creature, and next because the war had made such a curious difference in things. The old lines were being rubbed out. And Cicely, who had been in her day as exclusively snobbish as any other well-born damsel, felt now that it would not matter in the least if they remained rubbed out. Persons who 'did things' by land or sea; persons who invented things; persons with ideas; persons who had the art of making others follow them into the jaws of death;—these were going to be the aristocracy of the future. Though the much abused aristocracy of the present hadn't done badly either!

So she was only concerned with the emotional aspects of her brother's state. Was Nelly now convinced of her husband's death?—was that what her black meant? And if she were convinced, and it were legally possible for her to marry again and all that—what chance would there be for Willy? Cicely was much puzzled by Nelly's relation to him. She had seen many signs, pathetic signs, of a struggle on Nelly's side against Farrell's influence; especially in the time immediately following her first return to the north in March. She had done her best then, it seemed to Cicely, to do without him and to turn to other interests and occupations than those he set her, and she had failed; partly no doubt owing to her physical weakness, which had put an end to many projects,—that of doing week-end munition work for

instance—but still more, surely, to Farrell's own qualities. 'He is such a charmer with women,' thought Cicely, half smiling; 'that's what it is.'

By which she meant that he had the very rare gift of tenderness; of being able to make a woman feel, that as a human being, quite apart from any question of passion, she interested and touched him. It was just sympathy, she supposed, the artistic magnetic quality in him, which made him so attractive to women, and women so attractive to him. He was no longer a young man in the strict sense; he was a man of forty, with the prestige of great accomplishment, and a wide knowledge of life. It was generally supposed that he had done with love-affairs, and women instinctively felt it safe to allow him a personal freedom towards them, which from other men would have offended them. He might pat a girl's shoulder, or lay a playful grasp on a woman's arm, and nobody minded; it was a sign of his liking, and most people wished to be liked by him. However he never allowed himself any half-caress of the kind towards Nelly Sarratt now; and once or twice, in the old days, before Sarratt's disappearance, Cicely had fancied that she had seen Nelly check rather sharply one of these demonstrations of Willy's which were so natural to him, and in general so unconscious and innocent.

And now he never attempted them. What did that mean? Simply—so Cicely thought—that he was in love, and dared venture such things no longer.

But all the same there were plenty of devices open to him by which week after week he surrounded Nelly with a network of care, which implied that he was always thinking of her; which were in fact a caress, breathing a subtle and restrained devotion, more appealing than anything more open. And Cicely seemed to see Nelly yielding—unconsciously; unconsciously 'spoilt,' and learning to depend on the 'spoiler.' Why did Hester seem so anxious always about Farrell's influence with Nelly—so ready to ward him off, if she could? For after all, thought Cicely, easily, however long it might take for Nelly to recover her hold on life, and to clear up the legal situation, there could be but one end of it. Willy meant to marry this little woman; and in the long run no woman would be able to resist him.

The friends set out to stroll homewards through the long May evening, talking of the hideous Irish news—how incredible amid the young splendour of the Westmorland May!—or of the progress of the war.

Meanwhile Bridget Cookson was walking to meet them from the Rydal end of the Lake. She was accompanied by a Manchester friend, a young doctor, Howson by name, who had known the sisters before Nelly's marriage. He had come to Ambleside in charge of a patient that morning, and was going back on the morrow, and then to France. Bridget had stumbled on him in Ambleside, and find-

ing he had a free evening had invited him to come and sup with them. And a vivid recollection of Nelly Cookson as a girl had induced him to accept. He had been present indeed at the Sarratt wedding, and could never forget Nelly as a bride, the jessamine wreath above her dark eyes, and all the exquisite shapeliness of her slight form, in the white childish dress of fine Indian muslin, which seemed to him the prettiest bridal garment he had ever seen. And now—poor little soul!

'You think she still hopes?'

Bridget shrugged her shoulders.

'She says so. But she has put on mourning at last—a few weeks ago.'

'People do turn up, you know,' said the doctor musing. 'There have been some wonderful stories.'

'They don't turn up now,' said Bridget positively —'now that the enquiries are done properly.'

'Oh, the Germans are pretty casual—and the hospital returns are far from complete, I hear. However the probabilities, no doubt, are all on the side of death.'

'The War Office are certain of it,' said Bridget with emphasis. 'But it's no good trying to persuade her. I don't try.'

'No, why should you? Poor thing! Well, I'm off to X—— next week,' said the young man. 'I shall keep my eyes open there, in case anything about him should turn up.'

Bridget frowned slightly, and her face flushed.

'Should you know him again, if you saw him?' she asked, abruptly.

'I think so,' said the doctor with slight hesitation, 'I remember him very well at the wedding. Tall and slight?—not handsome exactly, but a good-looking gentlemanly chap? Oh yes, I remember him. But of course, to be alive now, if by some miraculous chance he were alive, and not to have let you know—why he must have had some brain mischief—paralysis—or——"

'He isn't alive!' said Bridget impatiently. 'The War Office have no doubts whatever.'

Howson was rather surprised at the sudden acerbity of her tone. But his momentary impression was immediately lost in the interest roused in him by the emergence from the wood, in front, of Nelly and Cicely. He was a warm-hearted fellow, himself just married, and the approach of the black-veiled figure, which he had last seen in bridal white, touched him like an incident in a play.

Nelly recognised him from a short distance, and went a little pale.

'Who is that with your sister?' asked Cicely.

'It is a man we knew in Manchester,—Doctor Howson.'

'Did you expect him?'

'Oh no.' After a minute she added—'He was at our wedding. I haven't seen him since.'

Cicely was sorry for her. But when the walkers met, Nelly greeted the young man very quietly. He

himself was evidently moved. He held her hand a little, and gave her a quick, scrutinising look. Then he moved on beside her, and Cicely, in order to give Nelly the opportunity of talking to him for which she evidently wished, was forced to carry off Bridget, and endure her company patiently all the way home.

When Nelly and the doctor arrived, following close on the two in front, Cicely cried out that Nelly must go and lie down at once till supper. She looked indeed a deplorable little wraith; and the doctor, casting, again, a professional eye on her, backed up Cicely.

Nelly smiled, resisted, and finally disappeared.

'You'll have to take care of her,' said Howson to Bridget. 'She looks to me as if she couldn't stand any strain.'

'Well, she's not going to have any. This place is quiet enough! She's been talking of munition-work, but of course we didn't let her.'

Cicely took the young man aside and expounded her brother's plan of the farm on the western side of Loughrigg. Howson asked questions about its aspect, and general comfort, giving his approval in the end.

'Oh, she'll pull through,' he said kindly, 'but she must go slow. This kind of loss is harder to bear—physically—than death straight out. I've promised her'—he turned to Bridget—'to make all the enquiries I can. She asked me that at once.'

After supper, just as Howson was departing, Farrell appeared, having driven himself over through the long May evening, ostensibly to take Cicely home, but really for the joy of an hour in Nelly's company.

He sat beside her in the garden, after Howson's departure, reading to her, by the lingering light, the poems of a great friend of his who had been killed at Gallipoli. Nelly was knitting, but her needles were often laid upon her knee, while she listened with all her mind, and sometimes with tears in her eyes, that were hidden by the softly dropping dusk. She said little, but what she did say came now from a greatly intensified inner life, and a sharpened intelligence; while all the time, the charm that belonged to her physical self, her voice, her movements, was at work on Farrell, so that he felt his hour with her a delight after his hard day's work. And she too rested in his presence, and his friendship. It was not possible now for her to rebuff him, to refuse his care. She had tried, tried honestly, as Cicely saw, to live independently—to 'endure hardness.' And the attempt had broken down. The strange, protesting feeling, too, that she was doing some wrong to George by accepting it was passing away. She was George's, she would always be his, to her dying day; but to live without being loved, to tear herself from those who wished to love her—for that she had proved too weak. She knew it, and was not unconscious of a certain moral defeat; as she looked out

upon all the strenuous and splendid things that women were doing in the war.

Farrell and Cicely sped homeward through a night that was all but day. Cicely scarcely spoke; she was thinking of Marsworth. Farrell had still in his veins the sweetness of Nelly's presence. But there were other thoughts too in his mind, the natural thoughts of an Englishman at war. Once, over their heads, through the luminous northern sky, there passed an aeroplane flying south-west high above the fells. Was it coming from the North Sea, from the neighbourhood of that invincible Fleet, on which all hung, by which all was sustained? He thought of the great ships, and the men commanding them, as greyhounds straining in the leash. What touch of fate would let them loose at last?

The Carton hospital was now full of men fresh from the front. The casualties were endless. A thousand a night often along the French front—and yet no real advance. The far-flung battle was practically at a stand-still. And beyond, the chaos in the Balkans, the Serbian débacle! No—the world was full of lamentation, mourning and woe; and who could tell how Armageddon would turn? His quick mind travelled through all the alternative possibilities ahead, on fire for his country. But always, after each digression through the problems of the war, thought came back to the cottage at Rydal, and Nelly on the lawn, her white throat emerging from

the thin black dress, her hands clasped on her lap, her eyes turned to him as he read.

And all the time it was *just* conceivable that Sarratt might still be discovered. At that thought, the summer night darkened.

CHAPTER XI

IN the summer of 1916, a dark and miserable June, all chilly showers and lowering clouds, followed on the short-lived joys of May. But all through it, still more through the early weeks of July, the spiritual heaven for English hearts was brightening. In June, two months before she was expected to move, Russia flung herself on the Eastern front of the enemy. Brussiloff's victorious advance drove great wedges into the German line, and the effect on that marvellous six months' battle, which we foolishly call the Siege of Verdun, was soon to be seen. Hard pressed they were, those heroes of Verdun!—how hard pressed no one in England knew outside the War Office and the Cabinet, till the worst was over, and the Crown Prince, 'with his dead and his shame,' had recoiled in sullen defeat from the prey that need fear him no more.

Then on the first of July, the British army, after a bombardment the like of which had never yet been seen in war, leapt from its trenches on the Somme front, and England held her breath while her new Armies proved of what stuff they were made. In those great days 'there were no stragglers—none!' said an eye-witness in amazement. The incredible

became everywhere the common and the achieved. Life was laid down as at a festival. 'From your happy son'—wrote a boy, as a heading to his last letter on this earth.

And by the end of July the sun was ablaze again on the English fields and harvests. Days of amazing beauty followed each other amid the Westmorland fells; with nights of moonlight on sleeping lakes, and murmuring becks; or nights of starlit dark, with that mysterious glow in the north-west which in the northern valleys so often links the evening with the dawn.

How often through these nights Nelly Sarratt lay awake, in her new white room in Mountain Ash Farm!—the broad low window beside her open to the night, to that 'Venus's Looking Glass' of Loughrigg Tarn below her, and to the great heights beyond, now dissolving under the moon-magic, now rosy with dawn, and now wreathed in the floating cloud which crept in light and silver along the purple of the crags. To have been lifted to this height above valley and stream, had raised and strengthened her, soul and body, as Farrell and Hester had hoped. Her soul, perhaps, rather than her body; for she was still the frailest of creatures, without visible ill, and yet awakening in every quick-eyed spectator the same misgiving as in the Manchester doctor. But she was calmer, less apparently absorbed in her own grief; though only, perhaps, the more accessible to the world misery of the war. In these restless nights,

her remarkable visualising power, which had only thriven, it seemed, upon the flagging of youth and health, carried her through a series of waking dreams, almost always concerned with the war. Under the stimulus of Farrell's intelligence, she had become a close student of the war. She read much, and what she read, his living contact with men and affairs—with that endless stream of wounded in particular, which passed through the Carton hospital —and his graphic talk illumined for her. Then in the night arose the train of visions; the trenches—always the trenches; those hideous broken woods of the Somme front, where the blasted soil has sucked the best life-blood of England; those labyrinthine diggings and delvings in a tortured earth, made for the Huntings of Death—'Death that lays man at his length'—for panting pursuit, and breathless flight, and the last crashing horror of the bomb, in some hell-darkness at the end of all:—these haunted her. Or she saw visions of men swinging from peak to peak above fathomless depths of ice and snow on the Italian front; climbing precipices where the foot holds by miracle, and where not only men but guns must go; or vanishing, whole lines of them, awfully forgotten in the winter snows, to reappear a frozen and ghastly host, with the melting of the spring.

And always, mingled with everything, in the tense night hours—that slender khaki figure, tearing the leaf from his sketch-book, leaping over the para-

dos,—falling—in the No Man's Land. But, by day, the obsession of it now often left her.

It was impossible not to enjoy her new home. Farrell had taken an old Westmorland farm, with its white-washed porch, its small-paned windows outlined in white on the grey walls, its low raftered rooms, and with a few washes of colour—pure blue, white, daffodil yellow—had made all bright within, to match the bright spaces of air and light without. There was some Westmorland oak, some low chairs, a sofa and a piano from the old Manchester house, some etchings and drawings, hung on the plain walls by Farrell himself, with the most fastidious care; and a few—a very few things—from his own best stores, which Hester allowed him to 'house' with Nelly from time to time—picture, or pot, or tapestry. She played watch-dog steadily, not resented by Farrell, and unsuspected by Nelly. Her one aim was that the stream of Nelly's frail life should not be muddied by any vile gossip; and she achieved it. The few neighbours who had made acquaintance with 'little Mrs. Sarratt' had, all of them been tacitly, nay eagerly willing, to take their cue from Hester. To be vouched for by Hester Martin, the 'wise woman' and saint of a country-side, was enough. It was understood that the poor little widow had been commended to the care of William Farrell and his sister, by the young husband whose gallant death was officially presumed by the War Office. Of course, Mrs. Sarratt, poor child, believed that he was

still alive—that was so natural! But that hope would die down in time. And then—anything might happen!

Meanwhile, elderly husbands—the sole male inhabitants left in the gentry houses of the district—who possessed any legal knowledge, informed their wives that no one could legally presume the death of a vanished husband, under seven years, unless indeed they happen to have a Scotch domicile, in which case two years was enough. *Seven years!*—preposterous!—in time of war, said the wives. To which the husbands would easily reply that, in such cases as Mrs. Sarratt's, the law indeed might be 'an ass,' but there were ways round it. Mrs. Sarratt might re-marry, and no one could object, or would object. Only—if Sarratt did rise from the dead, the second marriage would be *ipso facto* null and void. But as Sarratt was clearly dead, what did that matter?

So that the situation, though an observed one—for how could the Farrell comings and goings, the Farrell courtesies and benefactions, possibly be hid?—was watched only by friendly and discreet eyes, thanks always to Hester. Most people liked William Farrell; even that stricter sect, who before the war had regarded him as a pleasure loving dilettante, and had been often scandalised by his careless levity in the matter of his duties as a landlord and county magnate. 'Bill Farrell' had never indeed evicted or dealt hardly with any mortal tenant. He had

merely neglected and ignored them; had cared not a brass farthing about the rates which he or they paid—why should he indeed, when he was so abominably rich from other sources than land?—nothing about improving their cows, or sheep or pigs; nothing about 'intensive culture,' or jam or poultry, or any of the other fads with which the persons who don't farm plague the persons who do; while the very mention of a public meeting, or any sort of public duty, put him to instant flight. Yet even the faddists met him with pleasure, and parted from him with regret. He took himself 'so jolly lightly'; you couldn't expect him to take other people seriously. Meanwhile, his genial cheery manner made him a general favourite, and his splendid presence, combined with his possessions and his descent, was universally accepted as a kind of Cumberland asset, to which other counties could hardly lay claim. If he wanted the little widow, why certainly, let him have her! It was magnificent what he had done for his hospital; when nobody before the war had thought him capable of a stroke of practical work. Real good fellow, Farrell! Let him go in and win. His devotion, and poor Nelly's beauty, only infused a welcome local element of romance into the ever-darkening scene of war.

. . . . . .

The first anniversary of Sarratt's disappearance was over. Nelly had gone through it quite alone. Bridget was in London, and Nelly had said to Cicely

—'Don't come for a few days—nor Sir William—please! I shall be all right.'

They obeyed her, and she spent her few days partly on the fells, and partly in endless knitting and sewing for a war-workroom recently started in her immediate neighbourhood. The emotion to which she surrendered herself would soon reduce her to a dull vacancy; and then she would sit passive, not forcing herself to think, alone in the old raftered room, or in the bit of garden outside, with its phloxes and golden rods; her small fingers working endlessly—till the wave of feeling and memory returned upon her. Those few days were a kind of 'retreat,' during which she lived absorbed in the recollections of her short, married life, and, above all, in which she tried piteously and bravely to make clear to herself what she believed; what sort of faith was in her for the present and the future. It often seemed to her that during the year since George's death, her mind had been wrenched and hammered into another shape. It had grown so much older, she scarcely knew it herself. Doubts she had never known before had come to her; but also, intermittently, a much keener faith. Oh, yes, she believed in God. She must; not only because George had believed in Him, but also because she, her very self, had been conscious, again and again, in the night hours, or on the mountains, of ineffable upliftings and communings, of flashes through the veil of things. And so there must be another world; because the God she guessed at thus,

with sudden adoring insight, could not have made her George, only to destroy him; only to give her to him for a month, and then strike him from her for ever. The books she learnt to know through Farrell, belonging to that central modern literature, which is so wholly sceptical that the 'great argument' itself has almost lost interest for those who are producing it, often bewildered her, but did not really affect her. Religion—a vague, but deeply-felt religion—soothed and sheltered her. But she did not want to talk about it.

After these days were over, she emerged conscious of some radical change. She seemed to have been walking with George 'on the other side,' and to have left him there—for a while. She now really believed him dead, and that she had got to live her life without him. This first full and sincere admission of her loss tranquillised her. All the more reason now that she should turn to the dear friendships that life still held, should live in and for them, and follow where they led, through the years before her. Farrell, Cicely, Hester—they stood between her weakness—oh how conscious, how scornfully conscious, she was of it!—and sheer desolation. Cicely, 'Willy,'—for somehow she and he had slipped almost without knowing it into Christian names—had become to her as brother and sister. And Hester too—so strong!—so kind!—was part of her life; severe sometimes, but bracing. Nelly was conscious, indeed, occasionally, that something in Hester dis-

approved something in her. 'But it would be all right,' she thought, wearily, 'if only I were stronger.' Did she mean physically or morally? The girl's thought did not distinguish.

'I believe you want me "hatched over again and hatched different"!' she said one evening to Hester, as she laid her volume of 'Adam Bede' aside.

'Do I ever say so?'

'No—but—if you were me—you wouldn't stop here moping!' said Nelly, with sudden passion. 'You'd strike out—do something!'

'With these hands?' said Hester, raising one of them, and looking at it pitifully. 'My dear—does Bridget feed you properly?'

'I don't know. I never think about it. She settles it.'

'Why do you let her settle it?'

'She will!' cried Nelly, sitting upright in her chair, her eyes bright and cheeks flushing, as though something in Hester's words accused her. 'I couldn't stop her!'

'Well, but when she's away?'

'Then Mrs. Rowe settles it,' said Nelly, half laughing. 'I never enquire. What does it matter?'

She put down her knitting, and her wide, sad eyes followed the clouds as they covered the purple breast of the Langdales, which rose in threatening, thunder light, beyond the steely tarn in front. Hester watched her anxiously. How lovely was the brown head, with its short curls enclosing the deli-

cate oval of the face! But Nelly's lack of grip on life, of any personal demand, of any healthy natural egotism, whether towards Bridget, or anybody else, was very disquieting to Hester. In view of the situation which the older woman saw steadily approaching, how welcome would have been some signs of a greater fighting strength in the girl's nature!

But Nelly had made two friends since the migration to the farm with whom at any rate she laughed; and that, as Hester admitted, was something.

One was a neighbouring farmer, an old man, with splendid eyes, under dark bushy brows, fine ascetic features, grizzled hair, and a habit of carrying a scythe over his shoulder which gave him the look of 'Old Father Time,' out for the mowing of men. The other was the little son of a neighbouring parson, an urchin of eight, who had succumbed to an innocent passion for the pretty lady at the farm.

One radiant October afternoon, Nelly carried out a chair and some sketching things into the garden. But the scheme Farrell had suggested to her, of making a profession of her drawing, had not come to much. Whether it was the dying down of hope, and therewith of physical energy, or whether she had been brought up sharp against the limits of her small and graceful talent, and comparing herself with Farrell, thought it no use to go on—in any case, she had lately given it up, except as an amusement. But

there are days when the humblest artist feels the creative stir; and on this particular afternoon there were colours and lights abroad on the fells, now dyed red with withering fern, and overtopped by sunny cloud, that could not be resisted. She put away the splints she was covering, and spread out her easel.

And presently, through every bruised and tired sense, as she worked and worked, the 'Eternal Fountain of that Heavenly Beauty' distilled His constant balm. She worked on, soothed and happy.

In a few minutes there was a sound at the gate. A child looked in—black tumbled hair, dark eyes, a plain but most engaging countenance.

'I'm tomin in,' he announced, and without any more ado, came in. Nelly held out a hand and kissed him.

'You must be very good.'

'I is good,' said the child, radiantly.

Nelly spread a rug for him to lie on, and provided him with a piece of paper, some coloured chalks and a piece of mill board. He turned over on his front and plunged into drawing—

Silence—till Nelly asked—

'What are you drawing, Tommy?'

'Haggans and Hoons,' said a dreamy voice, the voice of one absorbed.

'I forget'—said Nelly gravely—'which are the good ones?'

'The Hoons are good. The Haggans are awfully

wicked!' said the child, slashing away at his drawing with bold vindictive strokes.

'Are you drawing a Haggan, Tommy?'

'Yes.'

He held up a monster, half griffin, half crocodile, for her to see, and she heartily admired it.

'Where do the Haggans live, Tommy?'

'In Jupe,' said the child, again drawing busily.

'You mean Jupiter?'

'I *don't!*' said Tommy reproachfully, 'I said Jupe, and I mean Jupe. Perhaps'—he conceded, courteously—'I may have got the idea from that other place. But it's quite different. You do believe it's quite different—don't you?'

'Certainly,' said Nelly.

'I'm glad of that—because—well, because I can't be friends with people that say it isn't different. You do see that, don't you?'

Nelly assured him she perfectly understood, and then Tommy rolled over on his back, and staring at the sky, began to talk in mysterious tones of 'Jupe,' and the beings that lived in it, Haggans, and Hoons, lions and bears, and white mice. His voice grew dreamier and dreamier. Nelly thought he was asleep, and she suddenly found herself looking at the little figure on the grass with a passionate hunger. If such a living creature belonged to her—to call her its very own—to cling to her with its dear chubby hands!

She bent forward, her eyes wet, above the uncon-

scious Tommy. But a step on the road startled her, and raising her head she saw 'Old Father Time,' with scythe on shoulder, leaning on the little gate which led from the strip of garden to the road, and looking at her with the expression which implied a sarcastic view of things in general, and especially of 'gentlefolk.' But he was favourably inclined to Mrs. Sarratt, and when Nelly invited him in, he obeyed her, and grounding his scythe, as though it had been a gun, he stood leaning upon it, indulgently listening while she congratulated him on a strange incident which, as she knew from Hester, had lately occurred to him.

A fortnight before, the old man had received a letter from the captain of his son's company in France sympathetically announcing to him the death in hospital of his eldest son, from severe wounds received in a raid, and assuring him he might feel complete confidence 'that everything that could be done for your poor boy has been done.'

The news had brought woe to the cottage where the old man and his wife lived alone, since the fledging of their sturdy brood, under a spur of Loughrigg. The wife, being now a feeble body, had taken to her bed under the shock of grief; the old man had gone to his work as usual, 'nobbut a bit queerer in his wits,' according to the farmer who employed him. Then after three days came a hurried letter of apology from the captain, and a letter from the chaplain, to say there had been a most deplorable

mistake, and 'your son, I am glad to say, was only slightly wounded, and is doing well!'

Under so much contradictory emotion, old Backhouse's balance had wavered a good deal. He received Nelly's remarks with a furtive smile, as though he were only waiting for her to have done, and when they ceased, he drew a letter slowly from his pocket.

'D'ye see that, Mum?'

Nelly nodded.

'I'se juist gotten it from t' Post Office. They woant gie ye noothin' till it's forced oot on 'em. But I goa regular, an to-day owd Jacob—'at's him as keps t' Post Office—handed it ower. It's from Donald, sure enoof.'

He held it up triumphantly. Nelly's heart leapt—and sank. How often in the first months of her grief had she seen—in visions—that blessed symbolic letter held up by some ministering hand!—only to fall from the ecstasy of the dream into blacker depths of pain.

'Oh, Mr. Backhouse, I'm so glad!' was all she could find to say. But her sweet trembling face spoke for her. After a pause, she added—'Does he write with his own hand?'

'You mun see for yorsel'.' He held it out to her. She looked at it mystified.

'But it's not opened!'

'I hadna juist me spectacles,' said Father Time, cautiously. 'Mebbee yo'll read it to me.'

'But it's to his mother!' cried Nelly. 'I can't open your wife's letter!'

'You needn't trooble aboot that. You read it, Mum. There'll be noothin' in it.'

He made her read it. There was nothing in it. It was just a nice letter from a good boy, saying that he had been knocked over in 'a bit of a scrap,' but was nearly all right, and hoped his father and mother were well, 'as it leaves me at present.' But when it was done, Father Time took off his hat, bent his grey head, and solemnly thanked his God, in broad Westmorland. Nelly's eyes swam, as she too bowed the head, thinking of another who would never come back; and Tommy, thumb in mouth, leant against her, listening attentively.

At the end of the thanksgiving however, Backhouse raised his head briskly.

'Not that I iver believed that foolish yoong mon as wrote me that Dick wor dead,' he said, contemptuously. 'Bit it's as weel to git things clear.'

Nelly heartily agreed, adding—

'I may be going to London next week, Mr. Backhouse. You say your son will be in the London Hospital. Shall I go and see him?'

Backhouse looked at her cautiously.

'I doan't know, Mum. His moother will be goin', likely.'

'Oh, I don't want to intrude, Mr. Backhouse. But if she doesn't go?'

'Well, Mum; I will say you've a pleasant coonte-

nance, though yo're not juist sich a thrivin' body as a'd like to see yer. But theer's mony people as du more harm nor good by goin' to sit wi' sick foak.'

Nelly meekly admitted it; and then she suggested that she might be the bearer of anything Mrs. Backhouse would like to send her son—clothes, for instance? The old man thawed rapidly, and the three, Nelly, Tommy, and Father Time, were soon sincerely enjoying each other's society, when a woman in a grey tweed costume, and black sailor hat, arrived at the top of a little hill in the road outside the garden, from which the farm and its surroundings could be seen.

At the sight of the group in front of the farm, she came to an abrupt pause, and hidden from them by a projecting corner of wall she surveyed the scene —Nelly, with Tommy on her knee, and the old labourer who had just shouldered his scythe again, and was about to go on his way.

It was Bridget Cookson, who had been to Kendal for the day, and had walked over from Grasmere, where the char-à-banc, alias the 'Yellow Peril,' had deposited her. She had passed the Post Office on her way, and had brought thence a letter which she held in her hand. Her face was pale and excited. She stood thinking; her eyes on Nelly, her lips moving as though she were rehearsing some speech or argument.

Then when she had watched old Backkhouse make his farewell, and turn towards the gate, she hastily

opened a black silk bag hanging from her wrist, and thrust the letter into it.

After which she walked on, meeting the old man in the lane, and run into by Tommy, who, head foremost, was rushing home to shew his glorious Haggan to his 'mummy.'

Nelly's face at sight of her sister stiffened insensibly.

'Aren't you very tired, Bridget? Have you walked all the way? Yes, you *do* look tired! Have you had tea?'

'Yes, at Windermere.'

Bridget cleared the chair on which Nelly had placed her paint-box, and sat down. She was silent a little and then said abruptly—

'It's a horrid bore, I shall have to go to London again.'

'Again?' Nelly's look of surprise was natural. Bridget had returned from another long stay in the Bloomsbury boarding-house early in October, and it was now only the middle of the month. But Bridget's doings were always a great mystery to Nelly. She was translating something from the Spanish—that was all Nelly knew—and also, that when an offer had been made to her through a friend, of some translating work for the Foreign Office, she had angrily refused it. She would not, she said, be a slave to any public office.

'Won't it be awfully expensive?' said Nelly after a pause, as Bridget did not answer. The younger

sister was putting her painting things away, and making ready to go in. For though the day had been wonderfully warm for October, the sun had just set over Bowfell, and the air had grown suddenly chilly.

'Well, I can't help it,' said Bridget, rather roughly. 'I shall have to go.'

Something in her voice made Nelly look at her.

'I say you *are* tired! Come in and lie down a little. That walk from Grasmere's too much for you!'

Bridget submitted with most unusual docility.

The sisters entered the house together.

'I'll go upstairs for a little,' said Bridget. 'I shall be all right by supper.' Then, as she slowly mounted the stairs, a rather gaunt and dragged figure in her dress of grey alpaca, she turned to say—

'I met Sir William on the road just now. He passed me in the car, and waved his hand. He called out something—I couldn't hear it.'

'Perhaps to say he would come to supper,' said Nelly, her face brightening. 'I'll go and see what there is.'

Bridget went upstairs. Her small raftered room was invaded by the last stormy light of the autumn evening. The open casement window admitted a cold wind. Bridget shut it, with a shiver. But instead of lying down, she took a chair by the window, absently removed her hat, and sat there thinking. The coppery light from the west illumined her face

with its strong discontented lines, and her hands, which were large, but white and shapely—a source indeed of personal pride to their owner.

Presently, in the midst of her reverie, she heard a step outside, and saw Sir William Farrell approaching the gate. Nelly, wrapped in a white shawl, was still strolling about the garden, and Bridget watched their meeting—Nelly's soft and smiling welcome, and Farrell's eagerness, his evident joy in finding her alone.

'And she just wilfully blinds herself!' thought Bridget contemptuously—'talks about his being a brother to her, and that sort of nonsense. He's in love with her!—of course he's in love with her. And as for Nelly—she's not in love with him. But she's getting used to him; she depends on him. When he's not there she misses him. She's awfully glad to see him when he comes. Perhaps, it'll take a month or two. I give it a month or two—perhaps six months—perhaps a year. And then she'll marry him—and——'

Here her thoughts became rather more vague and confused. They were compounded of a fierce impatience with the war, and of certain urgent wishes and ambitions, which had taken possession of a strong and unscrupulous character. She wanted to travel. She wanted to see the world, and not to be bothered by having to think of money. Contact with very rich people, like the Farrells, and the constant spectacle of what an added range and power is given

to the human will by money, had turned the dull discontent of her youth into an active fever of desire. She had no illusions about herself at all. She was already a plain and unattractive old maid. Nobody would want to marry her; and she did not want to marry anybody. But she wanted to *do* things and to *see* things, when the hateful war was over. She was full of curiosities about life and the world, that were rather masculine than feminine. Her education, though it was still patchy and shallow, had been advancing since Nelly's marriage, and her intelligence was hungry. The satisfaction of it seemed too to promise her the only real pleasures to which she could look forward in life. On the wall of her bedroom were hanging photographs of Rome, Athens, the East. She dreamt of a wandering existence; she felt that she would be insatiable of movement, of experience, if the chance were given her.

But how could one travel, or buy books, or make new acquaintances, without money?—something more at any rate than the pittance on which she and Nelly subsisted.

What was it Sir William was supposed to have, by way of income?—thirty thousand a year? Well, he wouldn't always be spending it on his hospital, and War income tax, and all the other horrible burdens of the time. If Nelly married him, she would have an ample margin to play with; and to do Nelly justice, she was always open-handed, always ready to give away. She would hand over her own

small portion to her sister, and add something to it. With six or seven hundred a year, Bridget would be mistress of her own fate, and of the future. Often, lately, in waking moments of the night, she had felt a sudden glow of exultation, thinking what she could do with such a sum. The world seemed to open out on all sides—offering her new excitements, new paths to tread in. She wanted no companion, to hamper her with differing tastes and wishes. She would be quite sufficient to herself.

The garden outside grew dark. She heard Farrell say 'It's too cold for you—you must come in,' and she watched Nelly enter the house in front of him—turning her head back to answer something he said to her. Even through the dusk Bridget was conscious of her sister's beauty. She did not envy it in the least. It was Nelly's capital—Nelly's opportunity. Let her use it for them both. Bridget would be well satisfied to gather up the crumbs from her rich sister's table.

Then from the dream, she came back with chill and desperation—to reality. The letter in her pocket—the journey before her—she pondered alternatives. What was she to do in this case—or in that? Everything might be at stake—everything was at stake—her life and Nelly's—

The voices from the parlour below came up to her. She heard the crackling of a newly lighted fire—Farrell reading aloud—and Nelly's gentle laughter. She pictured the scene; the two on either side

of the fire, with Nelly's mourning, her plain widow's dress, as the symbol—in Nelly's eyes—of what divided her from Farrell, or any other suitor, and made it possible to be his friend without fear. Bridget knew that Nelly so regarded it. But that of course was just Nelly's foolish way of looking at things. It was only a question of time.

And meanwhile the widow's dress had quite other meanings for Bridget. She pondered long in the dark, till the supper bell rang.

At supper, her silence embarrassed and infected her companions, and Farrell, finding it impossible to get another tête-à-tête with Nelly, took his leave early. He must be up almost with the dawn so as to get to Carton by nine o'clock.

Out of a stormy heaven the moon was breaking as he walked back to his cottage. The solitude of the mountain ways, the freshness of the rain-washed air, and the sweetness of his hour with Nelly, after the bustle of the week, the arrivals and departures, the endless business, of a great hospital:—he was conscious of them all, intensely conscious, as parts of a single, delightful whole to which he had looked forward for days. And yet he was restless and far from happy. He wandered about the mountain roads for a long time—watching the moon as it rose above the sharp steep of Loughrigg and sent long streamers of light down the Elterwater valley, and up the great knees of the Pikes. The owls hooted in

the oak-woods, and the sound of water—the Brathay rushing over the Skelwith rocks, and all the little becks in fell and field, near and far—murmured through the night air, and made earth-music to the fells. Farrell had much of the poet in him; and the mountains and their life were dear to him. But he was rapidly passing into the stage when a man overmastered by his personal desires is no longer open to the soothing of nature. He had recently had a long and confidential talk with his lawyer at Carlisle, who was also his friend, and had informed himself minutely about the state of the law. Seven years!—unless, of her own free will, she took the infinitesimal risk of marriage before the period was up.

But he despaired of her doing any such thing. He recognised fully that the intimacy she allowed him, her sweet openness and confidingness, were all conditioned by what she regarded as the fixed points in her life; by her widowhood, legal and spiritual, and by her tacit reliance on his recognition of the fact that she was set apart, bound as other widows were not bound, protected by the very mystery of Sarratt's fate, from any thought of re-marriage.

And he!—all the time the strength of a man's maturest passion was mounting in his veins. And with it a foreboding—coming he knew not whence—like the sudden shadow that, as he looked, blotted out the moonlight on the shining bends and loops of the Brathay, where it wandered through the Elterwater fields.

CHAPTER XII

BRIDGET COOKSON slowly signed her name to the letter she had been writing in the drawing-room of the boarding-house where she was accustomed to stay during her visits to town. Then she read the letter through—

'I can't get back till the middle or end of next week at least. There's been a great deal to do, of one kind or another. And I'm going down to Woking to-morrow to spend the week-end with a girl I met here who's knocked up in munition-work. Don't expect me till you see me. But I daresay I shan't be later than Friday.'

Bridget Cookson had never yet arrived at telling falsehoods for the mere pleasure of it. On the whole she preferred not to tell them. But she was well aware that her letter to Nelly contained a good many, both expressed and implied.

Well, that couldn't be helped. She put up her letter, and then proceeded to look carefully through the contents of her handbag. Yes, her passport was all right, and her purse with its supply of notes. Also the letter that she was to present to the Base Commandant, or the Red Cross representative at the port of landing. The latter had been left open for her to read. It was signed 'Ernest Howson,

M.D.,' and asked that Miss Bridget Cookson might be sent forward to No. 102, General Hospital, X Camp, France, as quickly as possible.

There was also another letter addressed to herself in the same handwriting. She opened it and glanced through it—

'DEAR MISS COOKSON,—I think I have made everything as easy for you as I can on this side. You won't have any difficulty. I'm awfully glad you're coming. I myself am much puzzled, and don't know what to think. Anyway I am quite clear that my right course was to communicate with you—*first.* Everything will depend on what you say.'

The following afternoon, Bridget found herself, with a large party of V.A.D.'s, and other persons connected with the Red Cross, on board a Channel steamer. The day was grey and cold, and Bridget having tied on her life-belt, and wrapped herself in her thickest cloak, found a seat in the shelter of the deck cabins whence the choppy sea, the destroyer hovering round them, and presently the coast of France were visible. A secret excitement filled her. What was she going to see? and what was she going to do? All round her too were the suggestions of war, commonplace and familiar by now to half the nation, but not to Bridget who had done her best to forget the war. The steamer deck was crowded with officers returning from leave who were walking up and down, all of them in life-belts, chatting and smoking. All eyes were watchful of the sea, and

the destroyer; and the latest submarine gossip passed from mouth to mouth. The V.A.D.'s with a few army nurses, kept each other company on the stern deck. The mild sea gave no one any excuse for discomfort, and the pleasant-faced rosy girls in their becoming uniforms, laughed and gossiped with each other, though not without a good many side glances towards the khaki figures pacing the deck, many of them specimens of English youth at its best.

Bridget however took little notice of them. She was becoming more and more absorbed in her own problem. She had not in truth made up her mind how to deal with it, and she admitted reluctantly that she would have to be guided by circumstance. Midway across, when the French coast and its light-houses were well in view, she took out the same letter which she had received two days before at the Grasmere post-office, and again read it through.

"X Camp, 102, General Hospital.

'DEAR MISS COOKSON,—I am writing to *you,* in the first instance instead of to Mrs. Sarratt, because I have a vivid remembrance of what seemed to me your sister's frail physical state, when I saw you last May at Rydal. I hope she is much stronger, but I don't want to risk what, if it ended in disappointment, might only be a terrible strain upon her to no purpose—so I am preparing the way by writing to you.

'The fact is I want you to come over to France—

at once. Can you get away, without alarming your sister, or letting her, really, know anything about it? It is the merest, barest chance, but I think there is just a chance, that a man who is now in hospital here *may* be poor George Sarratt—only don't build upon it yet, *please*. The case was sent on here from one of the hospitals near the Belgian frontier about a month ago, in order that a famous nerve-specialist, who has joined us here for a time, might give his opinion on it. It is a most extraordinary story. I understand from the surgeon who wrote to our Commandant, that one night, about three months ago, two men, in German uniforms, were observed from the British front-line trench, creeping over the No Man's Land lying between the lines at a point somewhere east of Dixmude. One man, who threw up his hands, was dragging the other, who seemed wounded. It was thought that they were deserters, and a couple of men were sent out to bring them in. Just as they were being helped into our trench, however, one of them was hit by an enemy sniper and mortally wounded. Then it was discovered that they were not Germans at all. The man who had been hit said a few incoherent things about his wife and children in the Walloon patois as he lay in the trench, and trying to point to his companion, uttered the one word "Anglais"—that, everyone swears to—and died. No papers were found on either of them, and when the other man was questioned, he merely shook his head, with a vacant look. Various tests were ap-

plied to him, but it was soon clear, both that he was dumb—and deaf—from nerve shock, probably—and that he was in a terrible physical state. He had been severely wounded—apparently many months before—in the shoulder and thigh. The wounds had evidently been shockingly neglected, and were still septic. The surgeon who examined him thought that what with exposure, lack of food, and his injuries, it was hardly probable he would live more than a few weeks. However, he has lingered till now, and the specialist I spoke of has just seen him.

'As to identification marks there were none. But you'll hear all about that when you come. All I can say is that, as soon as they got the man into hospital, the nurses and surgeons became convinced that he *was* English, and that in addition to his wounds, it was a case of severe shell-shock—acute and long-continued neurasthenia properly speaking,—loss of memory, and all the rest of it.

'Of course the chances of this poor fellow being George Sarratt are infinitesimal—I must warn you as to that. How account for the interval between September 1915 and June 1916—for his dress, his companion—for their getting through the German lines?

'However, directly I set eyes on this man, which was the week after I arrived here, I began to feel puzzled about him. He reminded me of someone—but of whom I couldn't remember. Then one afternoon it suddenly flashed upon me—and for the mo-

ment I felt almost sure that I was looking at George Sarratt. Then, of course, I began to doubt again. I have tried—under the advice of the specialist I spoke of—all kinds of devices for getting into some kind of communication with him. Sometimes the veil between him and those about him seems to thin a little, and one makes attempts—hypnotism, suggestion, and so forth. But so far, quite in vain. He has, however, one peculiarity which I may mention. His hands are long and rather powerful. But the little fingers are both crooked—markedly so. I wonder if you ever noticed Sarratt's hands? However, I won't write more now. 'You will understand, I am sure, that I shouldn't urge you to come, unless I thought it seriously worth your while. On the other hand, I cannot bear to excite hopes which may—which probably will—come to nothing. All I can feel certain of is that it is my duty to write, and I expect that you will feel that it is your duty to come.

'I send you the address of a man at the War Office—high up in the R.A.M.C.—to whom I have already written. He will, I am sure, do all he can to help you get out quickly. Whoever he is, the poor fellow here is very ill.'

The steamer glided up the dock of the French harbour. The dusk had fallen, but Bridget was conscious of a misty town dimly sprinkled with lights, and crowned with a domed church; of chalk downs, white and ghostly, to right and left; and close by,

of quays crowded with soldiers, motors, and officials. Carrying her small suit-case, she emerged upon the quay, and almost immediately was accosted by the official of the Red Cross who had been told off to look after her.

'Let me carry your suit-case. There is a motor here, which will take you to X——. There will be two nurses going with you.'

Up the long hill leading southwards out of the town, sped the motor, stopping once to show its pass to the sentries—khaki and grey, on either side of the road, and so on into the open country, where an autumn mist lay over the uplands, beneath a faintly star-lit sky. Soon it was quite dark. Bridget listened vaguely to the half-whispered talk of the nurses opposite, who were young probationers going back to work after a holiday, full of spirits and merry gossip about 'Matron' and 'Sister,' and their favourite surgeons. Bridget was quite silent. Everything was strange and dreamlike. Yet she was sharply conscious that she was nearing—perhaps—some great experience, some act—some decision—which she would have to make for herself, with no one to advise her. Well, she had never been a great hand at asking advice. People must decide things for themselves.

She wondered whether they would let her see 'the man' that same night. Hardly—unless he were worse—in danger. Otherwise, they would be sure to think it better for her to see him first in day-

light. She too would be glad to have a night's rest before the interview. She had a curiously bruised and battered feeling, as of someone who had been going through an evil experience.

Pale stretches of what seemed like water to the right, and across it a lighthouse. And now to the left, a sudden spectacle of lines of light in a great semicircle radiating up the side of a hill.

The nurses exclaimed—

'There's the Camp! Isn't it pretty at night?'

The officer sitting in front beside the driver turned to ask—

'Where shall I put you down?'

'Number —' said both the maidens in concert. The elderly major in khaki—who in peace-time was the leading doctor of a Shropshire country town—could not help smiling at the two lassies, and their bright looks.

'You don't seem particularly sorry to come back!' he said.

'Oh, we're tired of holidays,' said the taller of the two, with a laugh. 'People at home think they're *so* busy, and——'

'You think they're doing nothing?'

'Well, it don't seem much, when you've been out here!' said the girl more gravely—'and when you know what there is to do!'

'Aye, aye,' said the man in front. 'We could do with hundreds more of your sort. Hope you preached to your friends.'

'We did!' said both, each with the same young steady voice.

'Here we are—Stop, please.'

For the motor had turned aside to climb the hill into the semicircle. On all sides now were rows of low buildings—hospital huts—hospital marquees—stores—canteens. Close to the motor, as it came to a stand-still, the door of a great marquee stood open, and Bridget could see within, a lighted hospital ward, with rows of beds, men in scarlet bed-jackets, sitting or lying on them—flowers—nurses moving about. The scene was like some bright and delicate illumination on the dark.

'I shall have to take you a bit further on,' said the major to Bridget, as the two young nurses waved farewell. 'We've got a room in the hotel for you. And Dr. Howson will come for you in the morning. He thought that would be more satisfactory both for you and the patient than that you should go to the hospital to-night.'

Bridget acquiesced, with a strong sense of relief. And presently the camp and its lights were all left behind again, and the motor was rushing on, first through a dark town, and then through woods—pine woods—as far as the faint remaining light enabled her to see, till dim shapes of houses, and scattered lamps began again to appear, and the motor drew up.

'Well, you'll find a bed here, and some food,' said the major as he handed her out. 'Can't prom-

ise much. It's a funny little place, but they don't look after you badly.'

They entered one of the small seaside hotels of the cheaper sort which abound in French watering-places, where the walls of the tiny rooms seem to be made of brown paper, and everyone is living in their neighbour's pocket. But a pleasant young woman came forward to take Bridget's bag.

'Mademoiselle Cook—Cookson?' she said interrogatively. 'I have a letter for Mademoiselle. Du médecin,' she added, addressing the major.

'Ah?' That gentleman put down Bridget's bag in the little hall, and stood attentive. Bridget opened the letter—a very few words—and read it with an exclamation.

'DEAR MISS COOKSON,—I am awfully sorry not to meet you to-night, and at the hospital to-morrow. But I am sent for to Bailleul. My only brother has been terribly wounded—they think fatally—in a bombing attack last night. I am going up at once—there is no help for it. One of my colleagues, Dr. Vincent, will take you to the hospital and will tell me your opinion. In haste.—Yours sincerely,

'ERNEST HOWSON.'

'H'm, a great pity!' said the major, as she handed the note to him. 'Howson has taken a tremendous interest in the case. But Vincent is next best. Not the same thing perhaps—but still—Of

course the whole medical staff here has been interested in it. It has some extraordinary features. You I think have had a brother-in-law "missing" for some time?'

He had piloted her into the bare *salle à manger*, where two young officers, with a party of newly-arrived V.A.D.'s were having dinner, and where through an open window came in the dull sound of waves breaking on a sandy shore.

'My brother-in-law has been missing since the battle of Loos,' said Bridget—'more than a year. We none of us believe that he can be alive. But of course when Dr. Howson wrote to me, I came at once.'

'Has he a wife?'

'Yes, but she is very delicate. That is why Dr. Howson wrote to me. If there were any chance—of course we must send for her. But I shall know—I shall know at once.'

'I suppose you will—yes, I suppose you will,' mused the major. 'Though of course a man is terribly aged by such an experience. He's English—that we're certain of. He often seems to understand—half understand—a written phrase or word in English. And he is certainly a man of refinement. All his personal ways—all that is instinctive and automatic—the subliminal consciousness, so to speak—seems to be that of a gentleman. But it is impossible to get any response out of him, for anything connected with the war. And yet we doubt whether there is any actual brain lesion. So far it seems to

be severe functional disturbance—which is neurasthenia—aggravated by his wounds and general state. But the condition is getting worse steadily. It is very sad, and very touching. However, you will get it all out of Vincent. You must have some dinner first. I wish you a good-night.'

And the good man, so stout and broad-shouldered that he seemed to be bursting out of his khaki, hurried away. The lady seemed to him curiously hard and silent—'a forbidding sort of party.' But then he himself was a person of sentiment, expressing all the expected feelings in the right places, and with perfect sincerity.

Bridget took her modest dinner, and then sat by the window, looking out over a lonely expanse of sand, towards a moonlit sea. To right and left were patches of pine wood, and odd little seaside villas, with fantastic turrets and balconies. A few figures passed—nurses in white head dresses, and men in khaki. Bridget understood after talking to the little *patronne,* that the name of the place was Paris à la Mer, that there was a famous golf course near, and that large building, with a painted front to the right, was once the Casino, and now a hospital for officers.

It was all like a stage scene, the sea, the queer little houses, the moonlight, the passing figures. Only the lights were so few and dim, and there was no music.

'Miss Cookson?'

Bridget turned, to see a tall young surgeon in

khaki, tired, pale and dusty, who looked at her with a frown of worry, a man evidently over-driven, and with hardly any mind to give to this extra task that had been put upon him.

'I'm sorry to be late—but we've had an awful rush to-day,' he said, as he perfunctorily shook hands. 'There was some big fighting on the Somme, the night before last, and the casualty trains have been coming in all day. I'm only able to get away for five minutes.

'Well now, Miss Cookson'—he sat down opposite her, and tried to get his thoughts into business shape—'first let me tell you it's a great misfortune for you that Howson's had to go off. I know something about the case—but not nearly as much as he knows. First of all—how old was your brother-in-law?'

'About twenty-seven—I don't know precisely.'

'H'm. Well of course this man looks much older than that—but the question is what's he been through? Was Lieutenant Sarratt fair or dark?'

'Rather dark. He had brown hair.'

'Eyes?'

'I can't remember precisely,' said Bridget, after a moment. 'I don't notice the colour of people's eyes. But I'm sure they were some kind of brown.'

'This man's are a greenish grey. Can you recollect anything peculiar about Lieutenant Sarratt's hands?'

Again Bridget paused for a second or two, and

then said—'I can't remember anything at all peculiar about them.'

The surgeon looked at her closely, and was struck with the wooden irresponsiveness of the face, which was however rather handsome, he thought, than otherwise. No doubt, she was anxious to speak deliberately, when so much might depend on her evidence and her opinion. But he had never seen any countenance more difficult to read.

'Perhaps you're not a close observer of such things?'

'No, I don't think I am.'

'H'm—that's rather a pity. A great deal may turn on them, in this case.'

Then the face before him woke up a little.

'But I am quite sure I should know my brother-in-law again, under any circumstances,' said Bridget, with emphasis.

'Ah, don't be so sure! Privation and illness change people terribly. And this poor fellow has *suffered!*'—he shrugged his shoulders expressively. 'Well, you will see him to-morrow. There is of course no external evidence to help us whatever. The unlucky accident that the Englishman's companion—who was clearly a Belgian peasant, disguised—of that there is no doubt—was shot through the lungs at the very moment that the two men reached the British line, has wiped out all possible means of identification—unless, of course, the man himself can be recognised by someone who knew him. We have

had at least a dozen parties—relations of " missing " men—much more recent cases—over here already—to no purpose. There is really no clue, unless '—the speaker rose with a tired smile—' unless you can supply one, when you see him. But I am sorry about the fingers. That has always seemed to me a possible clue. To-morrow then, at eleven? '

Bridget interrupted.

' It is surely most unlikely that my brother-in-law could have survived all this time? If he had been a prisoner, we should have heard of him, long ago. Where could he have been? '

The young man shrugged his shoulders.

' There have been a few cases, you know—of escaped prisoners—evading capture for a long time —and finally crossing the line. But of course it *is* very unlikely—most unlikely. Well, to-morrow? ' He bowed and departed.

Bridget made her way to her small carpetless room, and sat for long with a shawl round her at the open window. She could imagine the farm in this moonlight. It was Saturday. Very likely both Cicely and Sir William were at the cottage. She seemed to see Nelly, with the white shawl over her dark head, saying good-night to them at the farm-gate. That meant that it was all going forward. Some day,—and soon,—Nelly would discover that Farrell was necessary to her—that she couldn't do without him—just as she had never been able in practical ways to do without her sister.

No, there was nothing in the way of Nelly's great future, and the free development of her—Bridget's —own life, but this sudden and most unwelcome stroke of fate. If she had to send for Nelly—supposing it really were Sarratt—and then if he died—Nelly might never get over it.

It might simply kill her—why not? All the world knew that she was a weakling. And if it didn't kill her, it would make it infinitely less likely that she would marry Farrell—in any reasonable time. Nelly was not like other people. She was all feelings. Actually to see George die—and in the state that these doctors described—would rack and torture her. She would never be the same again. The first shock was bad enough; this might be far worse. Bridget's selfishness, in truth, counted on the same fact as Farrell's tenderness. 'After all, what people don't see, they can't feel'—to quite the same degree. But if Nelly, being Nelly, had seen the piteous thing, she would turn against Farrell, and think it loyalty to George to send her rich suitor about his business. Bridget felt that she could exactly foretell the course of things. A squalid and melancholy veil dropped over the future. Poverty, struggle, ill-health for Nelly—poverty, and the starving of all natural desires and ambitions for herself—that was all there was to look forward to, if the Farrells were alienated, and the marriage thwarted.

A fierce revolt shook the woman by the window. She sat on there till the moon dropped into the sea,

and everything was still in the little echoing hotel. And then though she went to bed she could not sleep.

After her coffee and roll in the little *salle à manger,* which with its bare boards and little rags of curtains was only meant for summer guests, and was now, on this first of November, nippingly cold, Bridget wandered a little on the shore watching the white dust of the foam as a chill west wind skimmed it from the incoming waves, then packed her bag, and waited restlessly for Dr. Vincent. She understood she was to be allowed, if she wished, two visits in the hospital, so as to give her an opportunity of watching the patient she was going to see, without undue hurry, and would then be motored back to D—— in time for the night boat. She was bracing herself therefore to an experience the details of which she only dimly foresaw, but which must in any case be excessively disagreeable. What exactly she was going to do or say, she didn't know. How could she, till the new fact was before her?

Punctually on the stroke of eleven, a motor arrived in charge of an army driver, and Bridget set out. They were to pick up Vincent in the town of X—— itself and run on to the Camp. The sun was out by this time, and all the seaside village, with its gimcrack hotels and villas flung pell-mell upon the sand, and among the pines, was sparkling under it. So were the withered woods, where the dead leaves

were flying before the wind, the old town where Napoleon gathered his legions for the attack on England, and the wide sandy slopes beyond it, where the pine woods had perished to make room for the Camp. The car stopped presently on the edge of the town. To the left spread a river estuary, with a spit of land beyond, and lighthouses upon it, sharp against a pale blue sky. Every shade of pale yellow, of lilac and pearl, sparkled in the distance, in the scudding water, the fast flying westerly clouds, and the sandy inlets among the still surviving pines.

'You're punctuality itself,' said a man emerging from a building before which a sentry was pacing—'Now we shall be there directly.'

The building, so Bridget was informed, housed the Headquarters of the Base, and from it the business of the great Camp, whether on its military or its hospital side, was mainly carried on. And as they drove towards the Camp her companion, with the natural pride of the Englishman in his job, told the marvellous tale of the two preceding years—how the vast hospital city had been reared, and organised—the military camp too—the convalescent camp—the transports—and the feeding.

'The Boche thought they were the only organisers in the world!—We've taught them better!' he said, with a laugh in his pleasant eyes, the whole man of him, so weary the night before, now fresh and alert in the morning sunshine.

Bridget listened with an unwilling attention.

This bit of the war seen close at hand was beginning to suggest to her some new vast world, of which she was wholly ignorant, where she was the merest cypher on sufferance. The thought was disagreeable to her irritable pride, and she thrust it aside. She had other things to consider.

They drew up outside one of the general hospitals lined along the Camp road.

'You'll find him in a special ward,' said Vincent, as he handed her out. 'But I'll take you first to Sister.'

They entered the first hut, and made their way past various small rooms, amid busy people going to and fro. Bridget was aware of the usual hospital smell of mingled anæsthetic and antiseptic, and presently, her companion laid a hasty hand on her arm and drew her to one side. A surgeon passed with a nurse. They entered a room on the right, and left the door of it a little ajar.

'The operating theatre,' said Vincent, with a gesture that shewed her where to look; and through the open door Bridget saw a white room beyond, an operating table and a man, a splendid boy of nineteen or twenty lying on it, with doctors and nurses standing round. The youth's features shewed waxen against the white walls, and white overalls of the nurses.

'This way,' said Vincent. 'Sister, this is Miss Cookson. You remember—Dr. Howson sent for her.'

A shrewd-faced woman of forty in nurse's dress looked closely at Bridget.

'We shall be very glad indeed, Miss Cookson, if you can throw any light on this case. It is one of the saddest we have here. Will you follow me, please?'

Bridget found herself passing through the main ward of the hut, rows of beds on either hand. She seemed to be morbidly conscious of scores of eyes upon her, and was glad when she found herself in the passage beyond the ward.

The Sister opened a door into a tiny sitting-room, and offered Bridget a chair.

'They have warned you that this poor fellow is deaf and dumb?'

'Yes—I had heard that.'

'And his brain is very clouded. He tries to do all we tell him—it is touching to see him. But his real intelligence seems to be far away. Then there are the wounds. Did Dr. Howson tell you about them?'

'He said there were bad wounds.'

The Sister threw up her hands.

'How he ever managed to do the walking he must have done to get through the lines is a mystery to us all. What he must have endured! The wounds must have been dressed to begin with in a German field-hospital. Then on his way to Germany, before the wounds had properly healed—that at least is our theory—somewhere near the Belgian frontier he must have made his escape. What happened then, of

course, during the winter and spring nobody knows; but when he reached our lines, the wounds were both in a septic state. There have been two operations for gangrene since he has been here. I don't think he'll stand another.'

Bridget lifted her eyes and looked intently at the speaker—

'You think he's very ill?'

'Very ill,' said the Sister emphatically. 'If you can identify him, you must send for his wife at once —*at once!* Lieutenant Sarratt was, I think, married?'

'Yes,' said Bridget. 'Now may I see him?'

The Sister looked at her visitor curiously. She was both puzzled and repelled by Bridget's manner, by its lack of spring and cordiality, its dull suggestion of something reserved and held back. But perhaps the woman was only shy; and oppressed by the responsibility of what she had come to do. The Sister was a very human person, and took tolerant views of everything that was not German. She rose, saying gently—

'If I may advise you, take time to watch him, before you form or express any opinion. We won't hurry you.'

Bridget followed her guide a few steps along the corridor. The Sister opened a door, and stood aside to let Bridget pass in. Then she came in herself, and beckoned to a young probationer who was rolling bandages on the further side of the only bed the

room contained. The girl quietly put down her work and went out.

There was a man lying in the bed, and Bridget looked at him. Her heart beat so fast, that she felt for a moment sick and suffocated. The Sister bent over him tenderly, and put back the hair, the grey hair which had fallen over his forehead. At the touch, his eyes opened, and as he saw the Sister's face he very faintly smiled. Bridget suddenly put out a hand and steadied herself by a chair standing beside the bed. The Sister however saw nothing but the face on the pillow, and the smile. The smile was so rare!—it was the one sufficient reward for all his nurses did for him.

'Now I'll leave you,' said the Sister, forbearing to ask any further questions. 'Won't you sit down there? If you want anyone, you have only to touch that bell.'

She disappeared. And Bridget sat down, her eyes on the figure in the bed, and on the hand outside the sheet. Her own hands were trembling, as they lay crossed upon her lap.

How grey and thin the hair was—how ghostly the face—what suffering in every line!

Bridget drew closer.

'George!' she whispered.

No answer. The man's eyes were closed again. He seemed to be asleep. Bridget looked at his hand —intently. Then she touched it.

The heavy blue-veined eyelids rose again, as

though at the only summons the brain understood. Bridget bent forward. What colour there had been in it before ebbed from her sallow face; her lips grew white. The eyes of the man in the bed met hers—first mechanically—without any sign of consciousness; then—was it imagination?—or was there a sudden change of expression—a quick trouble—a flickering of the lids? Bridget shook through every limb. If he recognised her, if the sight of her brought memory back—even a gleam of it—there was an end of everything, of course. She had only to go to the nearest telegraph office and send for Nelly.

But the momentary stimulus passed as she looked—the eyes grew vacant again—the lids fell. Bridget drew a long breath. She raised herself and moved her chair farther away.

Time passed. The window behind her was open, and the sun came in, and stole over the bed. The sick man scarcely moved at all. There was complete silence, except for the tread of persons in the corridor outside, and certain distant sounds of musketry and bomb practice from the military camp half a mile away.

He was dying—the man in the bed. That was plain. Bridget knew the look of mortal illness. It couldn't be long.

She sat there nearly an hour—thinking. At the end of that time she rang the hand-bell near her.

Sister Agnes appeared at once. Bridget had risen and confronted her.

'Well,' said the Sister eagerly. But the visitor's irresponsive look quenched her hopes at once.

'I see nothing at all that reminds me of my brother-in-law,' said Bridget with emphasis. 'I am very sorry—but I cannot identify this person as George Sarratt.'

The Sister's face fell.

'You don't even see the general likeness Dr. Howson thought he saw?'

Bridget turned back with her towards the bed.

'I see what Dr. Howson meant,' she said, slowly. 'But there is no real likeness. My brother-in-law's face was much longer. His mouth was quite different. And his eyes were brown.'

'Did you see the eyes again? Did he look at you?'

'Yes.'

'And there was no sign of recognition?'

'No.'

'Poor dear fellow!' said the Sister, stooping over him again. There was a profound and yearning pity in the gesture. 'I wish we could have kept him more alive—more awake—for you, to see. But there had to be morphia this morning. He had a dreadful night. Are you *quite* sure? Wouldn't you like to come back this afternoon, and watch him again? Sometimes a second time—Oh, and what of the hands?—did you notice them?' And suddenly remembering Dr. Howson's words, the Sister pointed

to the long, bloodless fingers lying on the sheet, and to the marked deformity in each little finger.

'Yet—but George's hands were not peculiar in any way.' Bridget's voice, as she spoke, seemed to herself to come from far away; as though it were that of another person speaking under compulsion.

'I'm sorry—I'm sorry!'—the Sister repeated. 'It's so sad for him to be dying here—all alone—nobody knowing even who he is—when one thinks how somebody must be grieving and longing for him.'

'Have you no other enquiries?' said Bridget, abruptly, turning to pick up some gloves she had laid down.

'Oh yes—we have had other visitors—and I believe there is a gentleman coming to-morrow. But nothing that sounded so promising as your visit. You won't come again?'

'It would be no use,' said the even, determined voice. 'I will write to Dr. Howson from London. And I do hope'—for the first time, the kindly nurse perceived some agitation in this impressive stranger—'I do hope that nobody will write to my sister—to Mrs. Sarratt. She is very delicate. Excitement and disappointment might just kill her. That's why I came.'

'And that of course is why Dr. Howson wrote to you first. Oh I am sure he will take every care. He'll be very, very sorry! You'll write to him? And of course so shall I.'

The news that the lady from England had failed to identify the nameless patient to whom doctor and nurses had been for weeks giving their most devoted care spread rapidly, and Bridget before she left the hospital had to run the gauntlet of a good many enquiries, at the hands of the various hospital chiefs. She produced on all those who questioned her the impression of an unattractive, hard, intelligent woman whose judgment could probably be trusted.

'Glad she isn't my sister-in-law!' thought Vincent as he turned back from handing her into the motor which was to take her to the port. But he did not doubt her verdict, and was only sorry for 'old Howson,' who had been so sure that something would come of her visit.

The motor took Bridget rapidly back to D——, where she would be in good time for an afternoon boat. She got some food, automatically, at a hotel near the quay, and automatically made her way to the boat when the time came. A dull sense of something irrevocable,—something horrible,—overshadowed her. But the 'will to conquer' in her was as iron; and, as in the Prussian conscience, left no room for pity or remorse.

CHAPTER XIII

A PSYCHOLOGIST would have found much to interest him in Bridget Cookson's mental state during the days which followed on her journey to France. The immediate result of that journey was an acute sharpening of intelligence, accompanied by a steady, automatic repression of all those elements of character or mind which might have interfered with its free working. Bridget understood perfectly that she had committed a crime, and at first she had not been able to protect herself against the normal reaction of horror or fear. But the reaction passed very quickly. Conscience gave up the ghost. Selfish will, and keen wits held the field; and Bridget ceased to be more than occasionally uncomfortable, though a certain amount of anxiety was of course inevitable.

She did not certainly want to be found out, either by Nelly or the Farrells; and she took elaborate steps to prevent it. She wrote first a long letter to Howson giving her reasons for refusing to believe in his tentative identification of the man at X—— as George Sarratt, and begging him not to write to her sister. 'That would be indeed *cruel*. She can just get along now, and every month she gets a little stronger. But her heart, which was weakened

by the influenza last year, would never stand the shock of a fearful disappointment. Please let her be. I take all the responsibility. That man is not George Sarratt. I hope you may soon discover who he is.'

Step No. 2 was to go, on the very morning after she arrived in London, to the Enquiry Office in A—— Street. Particulars of the case in France had that morning reached the office, and Bridget was but just in time to stop a letter from Miss Eustace to Nelly. When she pointed out that she had been over to France on purpose to see for herself, that there was no doubt at all in her own mind, and that it would only torment a frail invalid to no purpose to open up the question, the letter was of course countermanded. Who could possibly dispute a sister's advice in such a case? And who could attribute the advice to anything else than sisterly affection!

Meanwhile among the mountains an unusually early winter was beginning to set in. The weather grew bitterly cold, and already a powdering of snow was on the fell-tops. For all that, Nelly could never drink deep enough of the November beauty, as it shone upon the fells through some bright frosty days. The oaks were still laden with leaf; the fern was still scarlet on the slopes; and the ghylls and waterfalls leapt foaming white down their ancestral courses. And in this austerer world, Nelly's delicate personality, as though braced by the touch of winter, seemed to move more lightly and buoyantly. She was more vividly interested in things and persons—

in her drawing, her books, her endless knitting and sewing for the wounded. She was puzzled that Bridget stayed so long in town, but alack! she could do very well without Bridget. Some portion of the savour of life, of that infinity of small pleasures which each day may bring for the simple and the pure in heart, was again hers. Insensibly the great wound was healing. The dragging anguish of the first year assailed her now but rarely.

One morning she opened the windows in the little sitting-room, to let in the sunshine, and the great spectacle of the Pikes wrapped in majestic shadow, purple-black, with the higher peaks ranged in a hierarchy of light behind them.

She leant far out of the window, breathing in the tonic smell of the oak leaves on the grass beneath her, and the freshness of the mountain air. Then, as she turned back to the white-walled raftered room with its bright fire, she was seized with the pleasantness of this place which was now her home. Insensibly it had captured her heart, and her senses. And who was it—what contriving brain—had designed and built it up, out of the rough and primitive dwelling it had once been?

Of course, William Farrell had done it all! There was scarcely a piece of furniture, a picture, a book, that was not of his choosing and placing. Little by little, they had been gathered round her. His hand had touched and chosen them, every one. He took far more pleasure and interest in the details of these

few rooms than in any of his own houses and costly possessions.

Suddenly—as she sat there on the window-ledge, considering the room, her back to the mountains—one of those explosions of consciousness rushed upon Nelly, which, however surprising the crash, are really long prepared and inevitable.

What did that room really *mean*—the artistic and subtle simplicity of it?—the books, the flowers, and the few priceless things, drawings or terra-cottas, brought from the cottage, and changed every few weeks by Farrell himself, who would arrive with them under his arm, or in his pockets, and take them back in like manner.

The colour flooded into Nelly's face. She dropped it in her hands with a low cry. An agony seized her. She loathed herself.

Then springing up passionately she began to pace the narrow floor, her slender arms and hands locked behind her.

Sir William was coming that very evening. So was Cicely, who was to be her own guest at the farm, while Marsworth, so she heard, was to have the spare room at the cottage.

She had not seen William Farrell for some time—for what counted, at least, as some time in their relation; not since that evening before Bridget went away—more than a fortnight. But it was borne in upon her that she had heard from him practically every day. There, in the drawer of her writing-

table, lay the packet of his letters. She looked for them now morning after morning, and if they failed her, the day seemed blank. Anybody might have read them—or her replies. None the less Farrell's letters were the outpouring of a man's heart and mind to the one person with whom he felt himself entirely at ease. The endless problems and happenings of the great hospital to which he was devoting more and more energy, and more and more wealth; the incidents and persons that struck him; his loves and hates among the staff or the patients; the humour or the pity of the daily spectacle;—it was all there in his letters, told in a rich careless English that stuck to the memory. Nelly was accustomed to read and re-read them.

Yes, and she was proud to receive them!—proud that he thought so much of her opinion and cared so much for her sympathy. But *why* did he write to her, so constantly, so intimately?—what was the real motive of it all?

At last, Nelly asked herself the question. It was fatal of course. So long as no question is asked of Lohengrin—who, what, and whence he is—the spell holds, the story moves. But examine it, as we all know, and the vision fades, the gleam is gone.

She passed rapidly, and almost with terror, into a misery of remorse. What had she been doing with this kindest and best of men? Allowing him to suppose that after a little while she would be quite ready to forget George and be his wife? That

threw her into a fit of helpless crying. The tears ran down her cheeks as she moved to and fro. Her George!—falling out there, in that ghastly No Man's Land, dying out there, alone, with no one to help, and quiet now in his unknown grave. And after little more than a year she was to forget him, and be rich and happy with a new lover—a new husband?

She seemed to herself the basest of women. Base towards George—and towards Farrell—both! What could she do?—what must she do? Oh, she must go away—she must break it all off! And looking despairingly round the room, which only an hour before had seemed to her so dear and familiar, she tried to imagine herself in exile from all it represented, cut off from Farrell and from Cicely, left only to her own weak self.

But she must—she *must!* That very evening she must speak to Willy—she must have it out. Of course he would urge her to stay there—he would promise to go away—and leave her alone. But that would be too mean, too ungrateful. She couldn't banish him from this spot that he loved, where he snatched his few hours—always now growing fewer—of rest and pleasure. No, she must just depart. Without telling him? Without warning? Her will failed her.

She got out her table, with its knitting, and its bundles of prepared work which had arrived that morning from the workroom, and began upon one of

them mechanically. But she was more and more weighed down by a sense of catastrophe—which was also a sense of passionate shame. Why, she was George's wife, still!—his *wife*—for who could *know,* for certain, that he was dead? That was what the law meant. *Seven years!*

She spent the day in a wretched confusion of thoughts and plans. A telegram from Cicely arrived about midday—'Can't get to you till to-morrow. Willy and Marsworth coming to-day—Marsworth not till late.'

So any hour might bring Farrell. She sat desperately waiting for him. Meanwhile there was a post-card from Bridget saying that she too would probably arrive that evening.

That seemed the last straw. Bridget would merely think her a fool; Bridget would certainly quarrel with her. Why, it had been Bridget's constant object to promote the intimacy with the Farrells, to throw her and Sir William together. Nelly remembered her own revolts and refusals. They seemed now so long ago! In those days it was jealousy for George that filled her, the fierce resolve to let no one so much as dream that she could ever forget him, and to allow no one to give money to George's wife, for whom George himself had provided, and should still provide. And at an earlier stage—after George left her, and before he died—she could see herself, as she looked back, keeping Sir William firmly at a

distance, resenting those friendly caressing ways, which others accepted—which she too now accepted, so meekly, so abominably! She thought of his weekly comings and goings, as they were now; how, in greeting and good-bye, he would hold her hands, both of them, in his; how once or twice he had raised them to his lips. And it had begun to seem quite natural to her, wretch that she was; because he pitied her, because he was so good to her—and so much older, nearly twenty years. He was her brother and dear friend, and she the little sister whom he cherished, who sympathised with all he did, and would listen as long as he pleased, while he talked of everything that filled his mind—the war news, his work, his books, his companions; or would sit by, watching breathlessly while his skilful hand put down some broad 'note' of colour or light, generally on a page of her own sketch-book.

Ah, but it must end—it must end! And she must tell him to-night.

Then she fell to thinking of how it was she had been so blind for so long; and was now in this tumult of change. One moment, and she was still the Nelly of yesterday, cheerful, patient, comforted by the love of her friends; and the next, she had become this poor, helpless thing, struggling with her conscience, her guilty conscience, and her sorrow. How had it happened? There was something uncanny, miraculous in it. But anyway, there, in a flash it

stood revealed—her treason to George—her unkindness to Willy.

For she would never marry him—never! She simply felt herself an unfaithful wife—a disloyal friend.

The November day passed on, cloudless, to its red setting over the Coniston fells. Wetherlam stood black against the barred scarlet of the west, and all the valleys lay veiled in a blue and purple mist, traversed by rays of light, wherever a break in the mountain wall let the sunset through. The beautiful winter twilight had just begun, when Nelly heard the step she waited for outside.

She did not run to the window to greet him as she generally did. She sat still, by the fire, her knitting on her knee. Her black dress was very black, with the plainest white ruffle at her throat. She looked very small and pitiful. Perhaps she meant to look it! The weak in dealing with the strong have always that instinctive resource.

'How jolly to find you alone!' said Farrell joyously, as he entered the room. 'I thought Miss Bridget was due.' He put down the books with which he had come laden and approached her with outstretched hands. 'I say!—you don't look well!' His look, suddenly sobered, examined her.

'Oh yes, I am quite well. Bridget comes to-night.'

She hurriedly withdrew herself, and he sat down

opposite her, holding some chilly fingers to the blaze, surveying her all the time.

'Why doesn't Bridget stop here and look after you?'

Nelly laughed. 'Because she has much more interesting things to do!'

'That's most unlikely! Have you been alone all the week?'

'Yes, but quite busy, thank you—and quite well.'

'You don't look it,' he repeated gravely, after a moment.

'So busy, and so well,' she insisted, 'that even I can't find excuses for idling here much longer.'

He gave a perceptible start. 'What does that mean? What are you going to do?'

'I don't know. But I think'—she eyed him uneasily—'hospital work of some kind.'

He shook his head.

'I wouldn't take you in my hospital! You'd knock up in a week.'

'You're quite, quite mistaken,' she said, eagerly. 'I can wash dishes and plates now as well as anyone. Hester told me the other day of a small hospital managed by a friend of hers—where they want a parlour-maid. I could do that capitally.'

'Where is it?' he asked, after a moment.

She hesitated, and at last said evasively—

'In Surrey somewhere—I think.'

He took up the tongs, and deliberately put the fire together, in silence. At last he said—

'I thought you promised Cicely and me that you wouldn't attempt anything of the kind?'

'Not till I was fit.' Her voice trembled a little. 'But now I am—quite fit.'

'You should let your friends judge that for you,' he said gently.

'No, no, I can't. I must judge for myself.' She spoke with growing agitation. 'You have been so awfully, awfully good to me!—and now'—she bent forward and laid a pleading hand on his arm—'now you must be good to me in another way! you must let me go. I brood here too much. I want not to think—I am so tired of myself. Let me go and think about other people—drudge a little—and slave a little! Let me—it will do me good!'

His face altered perceptibly during this appeal. When he first came in, fresh from the frosty air, his fair hair and beard flaming in the firelight, his eyes all pleasure, he had seemed the embodiment of whatever is lusty and vigorous in life—an overwhelming presence in the little cottage room. But he had many subtler aspects. And as he listened to her, the Viking, the demi-god, disappeared.

'And what about those—to whom it will do harm?'

'Oh no, it won't do harm—to anybody,' she faltered.

'It will do the greatest harm!'—he laid a sharp emphasis on the words. 'Isn't it worth while to be

just the joy and inspiration of those who can work hard—so that they go away from you, renewed like eagles? Cicely and I come—we tell you our troubles —our worries—our failures, and our successes. We couldn't tell them to anyone else. But you sit here; and you're so gentle and so wise—you see things so clearly, just because you're not in the crowd, not in the rough and tumble—that we go away—bucked up! —and run our shows the better for our hours with you. Why must women be always bustling and hurrying, and all of them doing the same things? If you only knew the blessing it is to find someone with a little leisure just to feel, and think!—just to listen to what one has to say. You know I am always bursting with things to say!'

He looked at her with a laugh. His colour had risen.

'I arrive here—often—full of grievances and wrath against everybody—hating the Government—hating the War Office—hating our own staff, or somebody on it—entirely and absolutely persuaded that the country is going to the dogs, and that we shall be at Germany's mercy in six months. Well, there you sit—I don't know how you manage it!—but somehow it all clears away. I don't want to hang anybody any more—I think we are going to win —I think our staff are splendid fellows, and the nurses, angels—(they ain't, though, all the same!)—and it's all *you!*—just by being you—just by giving me rope enough—letting me have it all out. And I

go away with twice the work in me I had when I came. And Cicely's the same—and Hester. You play upon us all—just because '—he hesitated—' because you're so sweet to us all. You raise us to a higher power; you work through us. Who else will do it if you desert us?'

Her lips trembled.

'I don't want to desert you, but—what right have I to such comfort—such luxury—when other people are suffering and toiling?'

He raised his eyebrows.

'Luxury? This little room? And there you sit sewing and knitting all day! And I'll be bound you don't eat enough to keep a sparrow!'

There was silence. She was saying to herself—'Shall I ever be able to go?—to break with them all?' The thought, the image, of George flashed again through her mind. But why was it so much fainter, so much less distinct than it had been an hour ago? Yet she seemed to turn to him, to beg him piteously to protect her from something vague and undefined.

Suddenly a low voice spoke—

'Nelly!—don't go!'

She looked up—startled—her childish eyes full of tears.

He held out his hand, and she could not help it, she yielded her own.

Farrell's look was full of energy, of determina-

tion. He drew nearer to her, still holding her hand. But he spoke with perfect self-control.

'Nelly, I won't deceive you! I love you! You are everything to me. It seems as if I had never been happy—never known what happiness could possibly mean till I knew you. To come here every week—to see you like this for these few hours—it changes everything—it sweetens everything—because you are in my heart—because I have the hope—that some day——'

She withdrew her hand and covered her face.

'Oh, it's my fault—my fault!' she said, incoherently—'how could I?—how *could* I?'

There was silence again. He opened his lips to speak once or twice, but no words came. One expression succeeded another on his face; his eyes sparkled. At last he said—'How could you help it? You could not prevent my loving you.'

'Yes, I could—I ought——,' she said, vehemently. 'Only I was a fool—I never realised. That's so like me. I won't face things. And yet'—she looked at him miserably—'I did beg you to let me live my own life—didn't I?—not to spoil me—not—not to be so kind to me.'

He smiled.

'Yes. But then you see—you were you!'

She sprang up, looking down upon him, as he sat by the fire. 'That's just it. If I were another person! But no!—no! I can't be your friend. I'm

not old enough—or clever enough. And I can't ever be anything else.'

'Why?' He asked it very quietly, his eyes raised to hers. He could see the quick beat of her breath under her black dress.

'Because I'm not my own. I'm not free—you know I'm not. I'm not free legally—and I'm not free in heart. Oh, if George were to come in at that door!'—she threw back her head with a passionate gesture—'there would be nobody else in the world for me—nobody—nobody!'

He stooped over the fire, fidgeting with it, so that his face was hidden from her.

'You know, I think, that if I believed there was the faintest hope of that, I should never have said a word—of my own feelings. But as it is—why must you feel bound to break up this—this friendship, which means so much to us all? What harm is there in it? Time will clear up a great deal. I'll hold my tongue—I promise you. I won't bother you. I won't speak of it again—for a year—or more—if you wish. But—don't forsake us!'

He looked up with that smile which in Cicely's unbiased opinion gave him such an unfair advantage over womankind.

With a little sob, Nelly walked away towards the window, which was still uncurtained though the night had fallen. Outside there was a starry deep of sky, above Wetherlam and the northern fells. The great

shapes held the valley in guard; the river windings far below seemed still to keep the sunset; while here and there shone scattered lights in farms and cottages, sheltering the old, old life of the dales.

Insensibly Nelly's passionate agitation began to subside. Had she been filling her own path with imaginary perils and phantoms? Yet there echoed in her mind the low-spoken words—'I won't deceive you! I love you!' And the recollection both frightened and touched her.

Presently Farrell spoke again, quite in his usual voice.

'I shall be in despair if you leave me to tackle Cicely alone. She's been perfectly mad lately. But you can put it all right if you choose.'

Nelly was startled into turning back towards him.

'Oh!—how can I?'

'Tell her she has been behaving abominably, and making a good fellow's life a burden to him. Scold her! Laugh at her!'

'What has she been doing?' said Nelly, still standing by the window.

Farrell launched into a racy and elaborate account—the effort of one determined, *coûte que coûte,* to bring the conversation back to an ordinary key—of Cicely's proceedings, during the ten days since Nelly had seen her.

It appeared that Marsworth, after many weeks during which they had heard nothing of him, had

been driven north again to his Carton doctor, by a return of neuralgic trouble in his wounded arm; and as usual had put up at the Rectory, where as usual Miss Daisy, the Rector's granddaughter, had ministered to him like the kind little brick she was.

'You see, she's altogether too good to be true!' said Farrell. 'And yet it is true. She looks after her grandfather and the parish. She runs the Sunday school, and all the big boys are in love with her. She does V.A.D. work at the hospital. She spends nothing on her dress. She's probably up at six every morning. And all the time, instead of being plain, which of course virtue ought to be, she's as pretty as possible—like a little bird. And Cicely can't abide her. I don't know whether she's in love with Marsworth. Probably she is. Why not? At any rate, whenever Marsworth and Cicely fall out, which they do every day—Cicely has the vile habit—of course you know!—of visiting Marsworth's sins upon little Daisy Stewart. I understood she was guilty of some enormity at the Red Cross sale in the village last week. Marsworth was shocked, and had it out with her. Consequently they haven't been on speaking terms for days.'

'What shall we do with them to-morrow?' cried Nelly in alarm, coming to sit down again by the fire and taking up her knitting. How strange it was—after that moment of tempestuous emotion—to have fallen back within a few minutes into this familiar,

intimate chat! Her pulse was still rushing. She knew that something irrevocable had happened, and that when she was alone, she must face it. And meanwhile here she sat knitting!—and trying to help him with Cicely as usual!

'Oh, and to-morrow!'—said Farrell with amusement, 'the fat will indeed be in the fire.'

And he revealed the fact that on his way through Grasmere he had fallen in with the Stewarts. The old man had been suffering from bronchitis, and the two had come for a few days' change to some cousins at Grasmere.

'And the old man's a bit of a collector and wants to see the Turners. He knows Carton by heart. So I had to ask them to come up to-morrow—and there it is!—Cicely will find them in possession, with Marsworth in attendance!'

'Why does she come at all?' said Nelly, wondering. 'She knows Captain Marsworth will be here. She said so, in her telegram.'

Farrell shrugged his shoulders.

'"It taks aw soarts to mak a worrld," as they say up here. But Marsworth and Cis are queer specimens! I am privately certain he can't do for long without seeing her. And as for her, I had no sooner arranged that he should join me here to-night, than she telegraphed to you! Just like her! I had no idea she thought of coming. Well, I suppose to quarrel yourself into matrimony is one of the recognised openings!'

The talk dropped. The joint consciousness behind it was too much for it. It fell like a withered leaf.

Farrell got up to go. Nelly too rose, trembling, to her feet. He took her hand.

'Don't leave us,' he repeated, softly. 'You are our little saint—you help us by just living. Don't attempt things too hard for you. You'll kill yourself, and then——'

She looked at him mutely, held by the spell of his eyes.

'Well then,' he finished, abruptly, 'there won't be much left for one man to live for. Goodnight.'

He was gone, and she was left standing in the firelight, a small, bewildered creature.

'What shall I do?' she was saying to herself, 'Oh, what ought I to do?'

She sank down on the floor, and hid her face against a chair. Helplessly, she wished that Hester would come!—someone wise and strong who would tell her what was right. The thought of supplanting George, of learning to forget him, of letting somebody else take his place in her heart, was horrible—even monstrous—to her. Yet she did not know how she would ever find the strength to make Farrell suffer. His devotion appealed—not to any answering passion in her—there was none—but to an innate lovingness, that made it a torment to her to refuse to love and be loved. Her power of dream,

of visualisation, shewed him to her alone and unhappy; when, perhaps, she might still—without harm—have been a help to him—have shewn him her gratitude. She felt herself wavering and retreating; seeking, as usual, the easiest path out of her great dilemma. Must she either be disloyal to her George?—her dead, her heroic George!—or unkind to this living man, whose unselfish devotion had stood between her and despair? After all, might it not still go on? She could protect herself. She was not afraid.

But she *was* afraid! She was in truth held by the terror of her own weakness, and Farrell's strength, as she lay crouching by the fire.

Outside the wind was rising. Great clouds were coming up from the south-west. The rain had begun. Soon it was lashing the windows, and pouring from the eaves of the old farmhouse.

Nelly went back to her work; and the wind and rain grew wilder as the hours passed. Just as she was thinking wearily of going to bed, there were sounds of wheels outside.

Bridget? so late! Nelly had long since given her up. What a night on which to face the drive from Windermere! Poor horse!—poor man!

Yes, it was certainly Bridget! As Nelly half rose, she heard the harsh, deep voice upon the stairs. A tall figure, heavily cloaked, entered.

'My dear Bridget—I'd quite given you up!'

'No need,' said Bridget coolly, as she allowed

Nelly to kiss her cheek. 'The afternoon train from Euston was a little late. You can't help that with all these soldiers about.'

'Come and sit down by the fire. Have you done all you wanted to do?'

'Yes.'

Bridget sat down, after taking off her wet waterproof, and held a draggled hat to the blaze. Nelly looking at her was struck by the fact that Bridget's hair had grown very grey, and the lines in her face very deep. What an extraordinary person Bridget was! What had she been doing all this time?

But nothing could be got out of the traveller. She sat by the fire for a while, and let Nelly get her a tray of food. But she said very little, except to complain of the weather, and, once, to ask if the Farrells were at the cottage.

'Sir William is there, with Captain Marsworth,' said Nelly. 'Cicely comes here to-morrow.'

'Does she expect me to give her my room?' said Bridget sharply.

'Not at all. She likes the little spare-room.'

'Or pretends to! Has Sir William been here to-day?'

'Yes, he came round.'

A few more questions and answers led to silence broken only by the crackling of the fire. The firelight played on Nelly's cheek and throat, and on her white languid hands. Presently it caught her wedding-ring, and Bridget's eye was drawn to the sparkle

of the gold. She sat looking absently at her sister. She was thinking of a tiny room in a hut hospital—of the bed—and of those eyes that had opened on her. And there sat Nelly—knowing nothing!

It was all a horrible anxiety. But it couldn't last long.

CHAPTER XIV

'SO you are not at church?'

The voice was Marsworth's as he stepped inside the flagged passage of the farm, Nelly having just opened the door to him.

'It's so far!—in winter,' said Nelly a little guiltily. 'I go to Grasmere in summer.'

'Oh! don't apologise—to a heathen like me! I'm only too thankful to find you alone. Is your sister here?'

'Yes. But we've made a room for her in one of the outhouses. She works there.'

'What at? Is she still learning Spanish?' asked Marsworth, smiling, as he followed Nelly into the little white drawing-room.

'I don't know,' said Nelly, after a moment, in a tone of depression. 'Bridget doesn't tell me.'

The corners of Marsworth's strong mouth shewed amusement. He was not well acquainted with Bridget Cookson, but as far as his observation went, she seemed to him a curious specimen of the half-educated pretentious woman so plentiful in our modern life. In place of 'psychology' and 'old Spanish,' the subjects in which Miss Cookson was said to be engaged, he would have liked to prescribe

for her—and all her kin—courses of an elementary kind in English history and vulgar fractions.

But, for Nelly Sarratt, Marsworth felt the tender and chivalrous respect that natures like hers exact easily from strong men. To him, as to Farrell, she was the 'little saint' and peacemaker, with her lovingness, her sympathy, her lack of all the normal vanities and alloys that beset the pretty woman. That she was not a strong character, that she was easily influenced and guided by those who touched her affections, he saw. But that kind of weakness in a woman—when that woman also possesses the mysterious something, half physical, half spiritual, which gives delight—is never unpleasing to such men as Marsworth, nor indeed to other women. It was Marsworth's odd misfortune that he should have happened to fall in love with a young woman who had practically none of the qualities that he naturally and spontaneously admired in the sex.

It was, however, about that young woman that he had come to talk. For he was well aware of Nelly's growing intimacy with Cicely, and had lately begun to look upon that as his last hope.

Yet he was no sooner alone with Nelly than he felt a dim compunction. This timid creature, with her dark haunting eyes, had problems enough of her own to face. He perceived clearly that Farrell's passion for her was mounting fast, and he had little or no idea what kind of response she was likely to make to it. But all the same his own need drove him

on. And Nelly, who had scarcely slept all night, caught eagerly at some temporary escape from her own perplexities.

'Dear Mrs. Sarratt!—have you *any* idea, whether Cicely cares one brass farthing for me, or not?'

To such broad and piteous appeal was a gallant officer reduced. Nelly was sorry for him, but could not hide the smile in her eyes, as she surveyed him.

'Have you really asked her?'

'Asked her? Many times!—in the dark ages. It is months, however, since she gave me the smallest chance of doing it again. Everything I do or say appears to annoy her, and of course, naturally, I have relieved her of my presence as much as possible.'

Nelly had taken up her knitting.

'If you never come—perhaps—Cicely thinks you are tired of her.'

Marsworth groaned.

'Is that her line now? And yet you know—you are witness!—of how she behaves when I do come.'

Nelly looked up boldly.

'You mustn't be angry, but—why can't you accept her—as she is—without always wanting her different?'

Marsworth flushed slightly. The impressive effect of his fine iron-grey head, and marked features, his scrupulously perfect dress, and general look of competence and ability, was deplorably undone by the signs in him of bewilderment and distress.

'You mean—you think I bully her?—she thinks so?'

'She—she feels—you so dreadfully disapprove of her!' said Nelly, sticking to it, but smiling.

'She regards me as a first-class prig in fact?'

'No—but she thinks you don't always understand.'

'That I don't know what a splendid creature she is, really?' said Marsworth with increasing agitation. 'But I do know it! I know it up and down. Why everybody—except those she dislikes!—at that hospital, adores her. She's wearing herself out at the work. None of us are fit to black her boots. But if one ever tries to tell her so—my hat!'

'Perhaps she doesn't like being praised either,' said Nelly softly. 'Perhaps she thinks—an old friend—should take it all for granted.'

'Good Lord!' said Marsworth holding his head in desperation—'whatever I do is wrong! Dear Mrs. Sarratt!—look here—I must speak up for myself. You know how Cicely has taken of late to being intolerably rude to anybody she thinks is my friend. She castigates me through them. That poor little girl, Daisy Stewart—why she's ready at any moment to worship Cicely! But Cicely tramples on her—*you* know how she does it—and if I interfere, I'm made to wish I had never been born! At the present moment, Cicely won't speak to me. There was some silly shindy at a parish tea last week—by the way, she's coming to you to-day?'

'She arrives for lunch,' said Nelly, looking at the clock.

'And the Stewarts are coming to the cottage in the afternoon!' said Marsworth in despair. 'Can you keep her away?'

'I'll try—but you know it's not much good trying to manage Cicely.'

'Don't I know it! I return to my first question—does she care a hapo'rth?'

Nelly was looking dreamily into the fire.

'You mean—does she care enough to give up her ways and take to yours?'

'Yes, I suppose I do mean that,' he said, with sudden seriousness.

Nelly shook her head, smiling.

'I don't know! But—Cicely's worth a deal of trouble.'

He assented with a mixture of fervour and depression.

'We've known each other since we were boy and girl. That's what makes the difficulty, perhaps. We know each other too well. When she was a child of fourteen, I was already in the Guards, and I used to try and tackle her—because no one else would. Her father was dead. Her mother had no influence with her; and Willy was too lazy. So I tried my hand. And I find myself doing the same thing now. But of course it's fatal—it's fatal!'

Nelly tried to cheer him up, but she was not herself very hopeful. She perceived too clearly the

martinet in him and the rebel in Cicely. If something were suddenly to throw them together, some common interest or emotion, each might find the other's heart in a way past undoing. On the other hand the jarring habit, once set up, has a way of growing worse, and reducing everything else to dust and ashes. Finally she wound up with a timid but emphatic counsel.

'Please—please—don't be sarcastic.'

He looked injured.

'I never am!'

Nelly laughed.

'You don't know when you are. And be very nice to her this afternoon.'

'How can I, if she shews me at once that I'm unwelcome? You haven't answered my question."

He was standing ready for departure. Nelly's face changed—became all sad and tender pity.

'You must ask it yourself!' she said eagerly. 'Go on asking it. It would be too—too dreadful, wouldn't it?—to miss everything—by being proud, or offended, for nothing——'

'What do you mean by everything?'

'You know,' she said, after a moment, shielding her eyes as they looked into the fire; 'I'm sure you know. It *is* everything.'

As he walked back to the cottage, he found himself speculating not so much about his own case as about his friend's. Willy was certainly in love. And Nelly Sarratt was as softly feminine as Cicely was

mannish and strong. But he somehow did not feel that Willy's chances were any safer than his own.

A car arrived at one o'clock bringing Cicely, much wrapped up in fur coat and motor-veils. She came impetuously into the sitting-room, and seemed to fill it. It took some time to peel her and reduce her to the size of an ordinary mortal. She then appeared in a navy-blue coat and skirt, with navy-blue boots buttoned almost to the knees. The skirt was immensely full and immensely short. When the strange erection to which the motor-veil was attached was removed, Cicely showed a dark head with hair cut almost short, and parted on the left side. Her eyebrows were unmistakably blackened, her lips unmistakably—strengthened; and Nelly saw at once that her guest was in a very feverish and irritated condition.

'Are you alone?' said Cicely, glancing imperiously round her, when the disrobing was done.

'Bridget is here.'

'What are you going to do this afternoon?'

'Can't we have a walk, you and I, together?'

'Of course we can. Why should we be bothered with anyone else?'

'I suppose,' said Nelly timidly—'they will come in to tea?'

'"They"? Oh! you mean Willy and Captain Marsworth? It is such a pity Willy can't find somebody more agreeable for these Sundays.'

Cicely threw herself back in her chair, and lifted a navy-blue boot to the fire.

'More agreeable than Captain Marsworth?'

'Exactly. Willy can't do anything without him, when he's in these parts; and it spoils everything!'

Nelly dropped a kiss on Cicely's hair, as she stood beside her.

'Why didn't you put off coming till next week?'

'Why should I allow my plans to be interfered with by Captain Marsworth?' said Cicely, haughtily. 'I came to see *you!*'

'Well, we needn't see much of him,' said Nelly, soothingly, as she dropped on a stool beside her friend.

'I'm not going to be kept out of the cottage, by Captain Marsworth, all the same!' said Cicely hastily. 'There are several books there I want.'

'Oh, Cicely, what have you been doing?' said Nelly, laying her head on her guest's knees.

'Doing? Nothing that I hadn't a perfect right to do. But I suppose—that very particular gentleman—has been complaining?'

Nelly looked up, and met an eye, fiercely interrogative, yet trying hard not to be interrogative.

'I've been doing my best to pick up the pieces.'

'Then he has been complaining?'

'A little narrative of facts,' said Nelly mildly.

'Facts—*facts!*' said Cicely, with the air of a disturbed lioness. 'As if a man whose ideas of manners and morals date from about—a million years before the Flood.'

'Dear!—there weren't any manners or morals a million years before the Flood.'

Cicely drew a breath of exasperation.

'It's all very well to laugh, but if you only knew how *impossible* that man is!'

'Then why not get a Sunday free from him?'

Cicely flushed against her will, and said nothing. Nelly's black eyes observed her with as much sarcasm in their sweetness as she dared to throw into them. She changed her tone.

'Don't go to the cottage this afternoon, Cicely.'

'Why?' The voice was peremptory.

'Well, because——' Nelly described Farrell's chance meeting with the Stewarts and the inevitable invitation. Cicely's flush deepened. But she tried to speak carelessly.

'Of course, the merest device on that girl's part! She arranged it all.'

'I really don't think she did.'

'Ah, well, *you* haven't seen what's been going on. A more shameless pursuit——'

Cicely stopped abruptly. There was a sudden sparkle in Nelly's look, which seemed to shew that the choice of the word 'pursuit' had been unlucky.

Miss Farrell quieted down.

'Of course,' she said, with a very evident attempt to recapture whatever dignity might be left on the field, 'neither Willy nor I like to see an old friend throwing himself away on a little pink and white

nonentity like Daisy Stewart. We can't be expected to smile upon it.'

'But I understand, from one of the parties principally concerned, that there is really nothing in it!' said Nelly, smiling.

'One of the perjuries I suppose at which Jove laughs!' said Cicely getting up, and hastily rearranging her short curls with the help of various combs, before the only diminutive looking-glass the farm sitting-room provided. 'However, we shall see what happens. I have no doubt Miss Daisy has arranged the proposal scene for this very afternoon. We shall be in for the last act of the play.'

'Then you *are* going to the cottage?'

'Certainly!' said Cicely, with a clearing brow. 'Don't let's talk any more about it. Do give me some lunch. I'm ravenous. Ah, here's your sister!'

For through a back window looking on what had once been a farm-yard, and was now a small garden, Cicely saw Bridget emerge from the rebuilt outhouse where an impromptu study had been devised for her, and walk towards the farm.

'I say, what's happened to your sister?'

'Happened to her? What do you mean?'

'She looks so much older.'

'I suppose she's been working too hard,' said Nelly, remorsefully. 'I wish I knew what it was all about.'

'Well, I can tell you'—said Cicely laughing and

whispering—'that Willy doesn't think it's about anything in particular!'

'Hush!' said Nelly, with a pained look. 'Perhaps we shall all turn out to be quite wrong. We shall discover that it was something——'

'Desperately interesting and important? Not it! But I'm going to be as good as good. You'll see.'

And when Bridget appeared, Cicely did indeed behave herself with remarkable decorum. Her opinion was that Nelly's strange sister had grown more unlike other people than ever since she had last seen her. She seemed to be in a perpetual brown study, which was compatible, however, with a curious watchfulness which struck Cicely particularly. She was always aware of any undercurrent in the room—of anyone going in or out—of persons passing in the road. At lunch she scarcely opened her lips, but Cicely was all the time conscious of being observed. After luncheon Bridget got up abruptly, and said she was going down to Grasmere to post a letter.

'Oh, then,' said Nelly—'you can ask if there are any for me.'

For there was no delivery at the farm on Sunday morning. Bridget nodded, and they soon saw her emerge from the farm gate and take the Grasmere road.

'I must say your sister seems greatly to prefer her own company to ours,' said Cicely, lighting her cigarette.

Again Nelly looked distressed.

'She was always like that,' she said at last. 'It doesn't really mean anything.'

'Do I know you well enough to ask whether you get on with her?'

Nelly coloured. 'I try my best'—she said, rather despairingly. Then she added—'she does all sorts of things for me that I'm too lazy to do for myself!'

'I believe she likes Willy better than most people!' laughed Cicely. 'I'm not suggesting, please, that she has designs upon him. But she is certainly more forthcoming to him than to anybody else, isn't she?'

Nelly did not reply. The remark only clouded her look still more. For her inner mind was perfectly aware of Bridget's attitude towards William Farrell, and understood it only too well. She knew by this time, past any doubt, that Bridget was hungry for the Farrell wealth, and was impatient with herself as a little fool who had not yet made certain of it. If she stuck to her purpose—if she went away and cut off all communication with Carton—Bridget would probably quarrel with her for good.

Would she stick to her purpose? Her mind was miserably swaying to and fro. She felt morally as she had once felt—physically—on a summer afternoon long before, when she, who could not swim, had gone imperceptibly out of her depth, while bathing, and had become suddenly aware of a seaward

current, carrying her away. No help was near. For five minutes, which had seemed five years, she had wrestled against the deadly force, which if her girlish strength had been a fraction less, would have swept her out, a lifeless plaything to the open sea. Spiritually, it was the same now. Farrell's will, and —infinitely less important, but still, to be reckoned with—Bridget's will, were pressing her hard. She did not know if she could keep her footing.

Meanwhile Cicely, in complete ignorance of the new and agonised tension in Nelly's mind, was thinking only of her own affairs. As soon as her after-luncheon cigarette was done, she sprang up and began to put on her hat.

'So you *are* going to the cottage?' said Nelly.

'Certainly. How do you like my boots?'

She held up one for inspection.

'I don't like them!'

'Fast, you think? Ah, wait till you see my next costume! High Russian boots, delicious things, up to there!' Cicely indicated a point above the knee, not generally reached by the female boot—'hand-painted and embroidered—with tassels—you know! —corduroy trousers!'

'Cicely!—you won't!'

'Shan't I—and a pink jersey, the new shade? I saw a friend of mine in this get-up, last week. Ripping! Only she had red hair, which completed it. Perhaps I might dye mine!'

They sallied forth into a mild winter afternoon.

Nelly would have avoided the cottage and Farrell if she could, but Cicely had her own way as usual. Presently they turned into a side lane skirting the tarn, from which the cottage and its approaches could be seen, at a distance. From the white-pillared porch, various figures were emerging, four in all.

Cicely came to a stop.

'There, you see!' she said, in her sharpest voice—'Look there!' For two of the figures, whom it was easy to identify as Captain Marsworth and Miss Stewart, diverging from the other pair, went off by themselves in the direction of Skelwith, with a gay wave of the hand to the old Rector and Farrell left behind.

Cicely's sudden scarlet ebbed in a moment, leaving her quite white. She walked on with difficulty, her eyes on the ground. Nelly dared not address her, or slip a sympathising hand into hers. And it was too late to retreat. Farrell had perceived them, and he and his companion came towards them. Cicely pulled herself rapidly together.

Nelly too had need of a minute or two's recollection before Farrell joined them. He and she were still to meet as usual, while meeting was possible—wasn't that how it stood? After all, her new plans could not be made in a moment. She had promised nothing; but he had promised—would she be able to hold him to it? Her heart trembled as he came nearer.

But he met her in a sunny mood, introducing her

to the white-haired old clergyman, and watching Cicely with eyes that shewed a hidden amusement.

'The other two seemed to have some private business to discuss,' he said carelessly. 'So they've got rid of us for a while. They're walking round the other side of the tarn and will join us at the top of Red Bank. At least if you're up to a walk?'

He addressed Nelly, who could do nothing but assent, though it meant a tête-à-tête with him, while Cicely and the old Rector followed.

Mr. Stewart found Miss Farrell anything but an agreeable companion. He was not a shrewd observer, and the love-affairs especially of his fellow-creatures were always a surprise and a mystery to him. But he vaguely understood that his little granddaughter was afraid of Miss Farrell and did not get on with her. He, too, was afraid of Cicely and her sharp tongue, while her fantastic dress and her rouge put him in mind of passages in the prophet Ezekiel, the sacred author of whom he was at that moment making a special study with a view to a Cambridge University sermon. It would be terrible if Daisy were ever to take to imitating Miss Farrell. He was a little disturbed about Daisy lately. She had been so absent-minded, and sometimes—even—a little flighty. She had forgotten the day before, to look out some passages for him; and there was a rent in his old overcoat she had not mended. He was disagreeably conscious of it. And what could she

have to say to Captain Marsworth? It was all rather odd—and annoying. He walked in a preoccupied silence.

Farrell and Nelly meanwhile were, it seemed, in no lack of conversation. He told her that he might possibly be going to France, in a week or two, for a few days. The Allied offensive on the Somme was apparently shutting down for the winter. 'The weather in October just broke everybody's heart, vile luck! Nothing to be done but to make the winter as disagreeable to the Boche as we can, and to go on piling up guns and shells for the spring. I'm going to look at hospitals at X——' he named a great base camp—' and I daresay they'll let me have a run along some bit of the front, if there's a motor to be had.'

Nelly stopped abruptly. He could see the colour fluctuating in her delicate face.

'You're going to X——? You—you might see Dr. Howson?'

'Howson?' he said, surprised. 'Do you know him? Yes, I shall certainly see Howson. He's now the principal surgeon at one of the General Hospitals there, where I specially want to look at some new splints they've been trying.'

Nelly moved on without speaking for a little. At last she said, almost inaudibly—

'He promised me—to make enquiries.'

'Did he?' Farrell spoke in the grave, deep voice he seemed to keep for her alone, which was always

sweet to her ear. 'And he has never written?' She shook her head. 'But he would have written—instantly—you may be quite sure, if there had been the slightest clue.'

'Oh yes, I know, I know,' she said hastily.

'Give me any message for him you like—or any questions you'd like me to ask.'

'Yes'—she said, vaguely.

It seemed to him she was walking languidly, and he was struck by her weary look. The afternoon had turned windy and cold with gusts of rain. But when he suggested an immediate return to the cottage, Nelly would have none of it.

'We were to meet Captain Marsworth and Miss Stewart. Where are they?'

They emerged at the moment from the cottage grounds, upon the high road; Farrell pointed ahead, and Nelly saw Marsworth and Miss Stewart walking fast up the hill before them, and evidently in close conversation.

'What can they have to talk about?' said Nelly, wondering.

'Wouldn't you like to know!'

'You're not going to tell me?'

'Not a word.'

His eyes laughed at her. They walked on beside each other, strangely content. And yet, with what undercurrents of sensitive and wounded consciousness on her side, of anxiety on his!

At the top of Red Bank they came up with Marsworth and Miss Stewart. Nelly's curiosity was more piqued than ever. If all that Marsworth had said to her was true, why this evident though suppressed agitation on the girl's part, and these shades of mystery in the air? Daisy Stewart was what anybody would have called 'a pretty little thing.' She was small, round-cheeked, round-eyed, round-limbed; light upon her feet; shewing a mass of brown hair brushed with gold under her hat, and the fresh complexion of a mountain maid. Nelly guessed her age about three and twenty, and could not help keenly watching the meeting between her and Cicely. She saw Cicely hold out a limp hand, and the girl's timid, almost entreating eyes.

But, the next moment, her attention was diverted to a figure slowly mounting the steep hill from Grasmere, on the top of which the cottage party were now standing, uncertain whether to push on for their walk, or to retreat homewards before the increasing rain. The person approaching was Bridget. As she perceived her, Nelly was startled into quick recollection of Cicely's remark of the morning—'Your sister seems to have grown much older.' But not only older—*different!* Nelly could not have analysed her own impression, but it was so painful that she ran down to meet her.

'Bridget, it's too far for you to Grasmere!—and coming back up this awful hill! You look quite

done. Do go home and lie down, or will you come to the cottage for tea first? It's nearer.'

Bridget looked at her coldly.

'Why do you make such a fuss? I'm all right. But I'm not coming to the cottage, thank you. I've got things to do.'

The implication was that everyone else was idle. Nelly drew back, rebuffed. And as Bridget reached the group at the top of the hill it was as though the rain and darkness suddenly deepened. All talk dropped. Farrell, indeed, greeted her courteously, introduced her to the Stewarts, and asked her to come back to the cottage for tea. But he was refused as Nelly had been. Bridget went on her way alone towards the farm. But after parting from the others she turned back suddenly to say—

'There were no letters for you, Nelly.'

'What a mercy!' said Farrell, as Bridget disappeared. 'Don't you think so? I never have any forwarded here.'

'Ah, but you get so many,' said Nelly wistfully. 'But still, letters don't matter to me—now.'

He said nothing, but it roused in him a kind of fierce soreness that she would always keep the past so clearly before herself and him.

Violent rain came on, and they hurried back to the cottage for shelter. Cicely was talking extravagantly all the time. She was tired to death, she said, of everything patriotic. The people who prattled about nursing, and the people who prattled about

the war—especially the people who talked about women's work—were all equally intolerable. She meant to give up everything very soon. Somebody must amuse themselves, or the world would go mad. Farrell threw at her some brotherly jibes; the old Rector looked scared; and Marsworth said nothing.

There were bright fires in the cottage, and the dripping walkers were glad to crowd round them; all except Cicely and Marsworth, who seemed to Nelly's watching sense to be oddly like two wrestlers pacing round each other, and watching the opportunity to close. Each would take out a book from the shelves and put it back, or take up a newspaper from the tables—crossing repeatedly, but never speaking. And meanwhile Nelly also noticed that Daisy Stewart, now that Cicely's close contact was removed, was looking extraordinarily pretty. Radiance, not to be concealed, shone from her charming childish face.

Suddenly Marsworth paused in front of Cicely, intercepting her as she was making for the door.

'Would you be an angel, Miss Farrell, and help me to find a particular Turner drawing I want to see? Willy says it's in the studio somewhere.'

Cicely paused, half haughty, half irresolute.

'Willy knows his way about the portfolios much better than I do.'

Marsworth came nearer, and leaning one hand on

the table between them, bent over to her. He was smiling, but there was emotion in his look.

'Willy is looking after these people. Won't you?'

Cicely considered.

'All right!' she said carelessly, at last, and led the way.

CHAPTER XV

THE studio was empty. A wood fire burnt on the wide hearth, making a pleasant glow in the wintry twilight. Cicely seated herself on the end of a sofa, crossed her feet, and took out a cigarette. But to Marsworth's intense relief she had taken off the helmet-like erection she called a hat, and her black curly hair strayed as it pleased about her brow and eyes.

'Well?' she said, at last, looking at him coolly. Marsworth could not help laughing. He brought a chair, and placed it where he could see her from below, as he lay back in it, his hands behind his head.

'Of course, you don't want to look at the portfolio,' she resumed, 'that was your excuse. You want to tell me of your engagement to Miss Stewart.'

Marsworth laughed again. Her ear caught what seemed to be a note of triumph.

'Make haste, please!' she said, breathing quickly. 'There isn't very much time.'

His face changed. He sat up, and held out his hand to her.

'Dear Cicely, I want you to do something for me.'

But she put her own behind her back.

'Have you been quarrelling already? Because if

you want me to make it up, that really isn't my vocation.'

He was silent a moment surveying her. Then he said quietly—

'I want you to help me. I want you to be kind to that little girl.'

'Daisy Stewart? Thank you. But I've no gift at all for mothering babes! Besides—she'll now have all the advice, and all the kindness she wants.'

Marsworth's lips twitched.

'Yes, that's true—if you and I can help her out. Cicely!—aren't you a great friend of Sir John Raine?'

He named one of the chiefs of the Army Medical Department, a man whose good word was the making of any aspirant in the field he ruled.

Cicely looked rather darkly at her questioner.

'What do you mean?'

'I want you to help me get an appointment for somebody.'

'For whom?'

'For the man Daisy Stewart wants to marry.'

Cicely could not conceal her start.

'I don't like being mystified,' she said coldly.

Marsworth allowed his smile to shew itself.

'I'm not trying to mystify you in the least. Daisy Stewart has been engaged for nearly a year to one of the house-surgeons in your hospital—young Fellows. Nobody knows it—not Willy even. It has been kept a dead secret, because that wicked old man the

Rector won't have it. Daisy makes him comfortable, and he won't give her up, if he can help it. And as young Fellows has nothing but his present pay—£160 a year with board and lodging—it seemed hopeless. But now he has got his eye on something.'

And in a quiet business-like voice Marsworth put the case of the penniless one—his qualifications, his ambitions, and the particular post under the Army Medical Board on which he had set his hopes. If only somebody with influence would give him a leg up!

Cicely interrupted.

'Does Willy know?'

'No. You see, I have come to you first.'

'How long have you known?'

'Since my stay with them last autumn. I suspected something then, just as I was leaving; and Miss Daisy confessed—when I was there in May. Since then she seems to have elected me her chief adviser. But, of course, I had no right to tell anybody anything.'

'That is what you like—to advise people?'

Marsworth considered it.

'There was a time'—he said, at last, in a different voice, 'when my advice used to be asked by someone else—and sometimes taken.'

Cicely pretended to light another cigarette, but her slim fingers shook a little.

'And now—you never give it?'

'Oh yes, I do,' he said, with sudden bitterness—'even unasked. I'm always the same old bore.'

There was silence. His right hand stole towards her left that was lying limply over her knee. Cicely's eyes looking down were occupied with his disabled arm, which, although much improved, was still glad to slip into its sling whenever it was not actively wanted.

But just as he was capturing her, Cicely sprang up.

'I must go and see about Sir John Raine.'

'Cicely—I don't care a brass farthing about Sir John Raine!'

'But having once brought him in, I recommend you to stick to him,' said Cicely, with teasing eyes. 'And don't go advising young women. It's not good for the military. *I'm* going to take this business in hand.'

And she made for departure, but Marsworth got to the door first, and put his back against it.

'Find me the Turner, Cicely.'

'A man who asks for a thing on false pretences shouldn't have it.'

A silence. Then a meek voice said—

'Captain Marsworth, my brother, Sir William Farrell, will be requiring my services at tea!'

Marsworth moved aside and she forward. But as she neared him, he caught her passionately in his arms and kissed her. She released herself, crimson.

'Do I like being kissed?' she said in a low voice

—'do I? Anyway don't do it again!—and if you dare to say a word yet—to anyone——'

Her eyes threatened; but he saw in them revelations her pride could not check, and would have disobeyed her at once; but she was too quick for him. In a second she had opened the door and was gone.

During the rest of the afternoon, her brother and Nelly watched Cicely's proceedings with stupefaction; only equalled by the bewilderment of Miss Daisy Stewart. For that young lady was promoted to the good graces of Sir William's formidable sister with a rapidity and completeness which only natural good manners and good sense could have enabled her to deal with; considering the icy exclusion to which she had been so long condemned. But as she possessed both, she took it very simply; always with the same serene light in her grey eyes.

Marsworth said to himself presently that young Fellows' chances were good. But in truth he hardly remembered anything about them, except that by the help of them he had kissed Cicely! And he had yet to find out what that remarkable fact was to mean, either to himself or to her. She refused to let him take her back to the farm, and she only gave him a finger in farewell. Nor did she say a word of what had happened, even to Nelly.

Nelly spent again a very wakeful night. Farrell had walked home with them, and she understood from him that, although he was going over early to

Carton the following morning, he would be at the cottage again before many days were over. It seemed to her that in telling her so he had looked at her with eyes that seemed to implore her to trust him. And she, on hearing it, had been merely dumb and irresponsive, not forbidding or repellent, as she ought to have been. The courage to wound him to the quick—to leave him bereft, to go out into the desert herself, seemed to be more and more oozing away from her.

Yet there beside her bed, on the table which held her Testament, and the few books—almost all given her by W. F.—to which she was wont to turn in her wakeful hours, was George's photograph in uniform. About three o'clock in the morning she lit her candle, and lay looking at it, till suddenly she stretched out her hand for it, kissed it repeatedly, and putting it on her breast, clasped her hands over it, and so fell asleep.

But before she fell asleep, she was puzzled by the sounds in Bridget's room next door. Bridget seemed to be walking about—pacing up and down incessantly. Sometimes the steps would cease; only to begin again after a while with the same monotony. What could be the matter with Bridget? This vague worry about her sister entered into and heightened all Nelly's other troubles. Yet all the same, in the end, she fell asleep; and the westerly wind blowing over Wetherlam, and chasing wild flocks of grey

rain-clouds before him, found no one awake in the cottage or the farm to listen to the concert he was making with the fells, but Bridget—and Cicely.

Bridget Cookson had indeed some cause for wakefulness. Locked away in the old workbox, where she kept the papers to which she attached importance, was a letter bearing the imprint 'O.A.S.,' which had been delivered to her on Sunday afternoon by the Grasmere postmistress. It ran as follows:

'DEAR MISS COOKSON,—I know of course that you are fully convinced the poor fellow we have here in charge has nothing to do with your brother-in-law. But as you saw him, and as the case may throw light on other cases of a similar nature, I thought I would just let you know that owing apparently to the treatment we have been carrying out, there are some very interesting signs of returning consciousness since your visit, though nothing very definite as yet. He is terribly ill, and physically I see no chance for him. But I think he *may* be able to tell us who he is before the end, in which case I will inform you, lest you should now or at any future time feel the smallest misgiving as to your own verdict in the matter. This is very unlikely, I know, for I understand you were very decided; but still as soon as we have definite information—if we get it—you may wish to inform poor Mrs. Sarratt of your journey

here. I hope she is getting stronger. She did indeed look very frail when I saw her last.

'Yours very truly,

'ROBERT HOWSON.'

Since the receipt of that letter Bridget's reflections had been more disagreeable than any she had yet grappled with. In Nelly's company the awfulness of what she had done did sometimes smite home to her. Well, she had staked everything upon it, and the only possible course was to brazen it out. That George should die, and die *quickly*—without any return of memory or speech, was what she terribly and passionately desired. In all probability he would die quickly; he might even now be dead. She saw the thing perpetually as a race between his returning mind—if he still lived, and it was returning—and his ebbing strength. If she had lived in old Sicilian days, she would have made a waxen image like the Theocritean sorceress, and put it by the fire, that as it wasted, so George might waste. As it was, she passed her time during the forty-eight hours after reading Howson's letter in a silent and murderous concentration on one thought and wish—George Sarratt's speedy death.

What a release indeed for everybody!—if people would only tell the truth, and not dress up their real feelings and interests in stale sentimentalisms. Farrell made happy at no very distant date; Nelly settled for life with a rich man who adored her; her own

future secured—with the very modest freedom and opportunity she craved:—all this on the one side—futile tragedy and suffering on the other. None the less, there were moments when, with a start, she realised what other people might think of her conduct. But after all she could always plead it was a mistake—an honest mistake. Are there not constantly cases in the law courts, which shew how easy it is to fail in identifying the right person, or to persist in identifying the wrong one?

During the days before Farrell returned, the two sisters were alone together. Bridget would gladly have gone away out of sight and hearing of Nelly. But she did not dare to leave the situation—above all, the postman—unwatched. Meanwhile Nelly made repeated efforts to break down the new and inexplicable barrier which seemed to have arisen between herself and Bridget. Why would Bridget always sit alone in that chilly outside room, which even with a large fire seemed to Nelly uninhabitable? She tried to woo her sister, by all the small devices in her power.

'Why won't you come and sit with me a bit, Bridget? I'm so dull all alone!'—she would say when, after luncheon or high tea, Bridget showed signs of immediately shutting herself up again.

'I can't. I must do some work.'

'Do tell me what you're doing, Bridget?'

'Oh, you wouldn't understand.'

'Well, other people don't always think me a born

idiot!'—Nelly would say, not without resentment. 'I really could understand, Bridget, if you'd try.'

'I haven't the time.'

'And you're killing yourself with so many hours of it. Why should you slave so? If you only would come and help me sometimes with the Red Cross work, I'd do any needlework for you, that you wanted.'

'You know I hate needlework.'

'You're not doing anything—not *anything*—for the war, Bridget!' Nelly would venture, wistfully, at last.

'There are plenty of people to do things for the war. I didn't want the war! Nobody asked my opinion.'

And presently the door would shut, and Nelly would be left to watch the torrents of rain outside, and to endeavour by reading and drawing, by needlework and the society of her small friend Tommy, whenever she could capture him, to get through the day. She pined for Hester, but Hester was doing Welfare work in a munition factory at Leeds, and could not be got at.

So there she sat alone, brooding and planning, too timid to talk to Bridget of her own schemes, and, in her piteous indecision, longing guiltily for Farrell's return. Meanwhile she had written to several acquaintances who were doing V.A.D. work in various voluntary hospitals, to ask for information.

Suddenly, after the rain came frost and north

wind—finally snow; the beginning in the north of the fiercest winter Western Europe has known for many years. Over heights and dales alike spread the white Leveller, melting by day in the valley bottoms, and filling up his wastage by renewed falls at night. Nelly ventured out sometimes to look at the high glories of Wetherlam and the Pikes, under occasional gleams of sun. Bridget never put a foot out of doors, except when she went to the garden gate to look for the postman in the road, and take the letters from him.

At last, one evening, when after a milder morning a bitter blast from the north springing up at dusk had, once more, sent gusts of snow scudding over the fells, Nelly's listening ear heard the well-known step at the gate. She sprang up with a start of joy. She had been so lonely, so imprisoned with her own sad thoughts. The coming of this kind, strong man, so faithful to his small friend through all the stress of his busy and important life, made a sudden impression upon her, which brought the tears to her eyes. She thought of Carton, of its splendid buildings, and the great hospital which now absorbed them; she seemed to see Farrell as the king of it all, the fame of his doings spreading every month over the north, and wiping out all that earlier conception of him as a dilettante and an idler of which she had heard from Hester. And yet, escaping from all that activity, that power, that constant interest and excitement, here he was, making use of his first spare hour to

come through the snow and the dark, just to spend an hour with Nelly Sarratt, just to cheer her lonely little life.

Nelly ran to the window and opened it.

'Is that really you?' she called, joyously, while the snow drifted against her face.

Farrell, carrying a lantern, was nearing the porch. The light upon his face as he turned shewed her his look of delight.

'I'm later than I meant, but the roads are awful. May I walk in?'

She ran down to meet him; then hung back rather shyly in the passage, while he took off his overcoat and shook the snow from his beard.

'Have you any visitors?' he asked, still dusting away the snow.

'Only Bridget. I asked Hester, but she couldn't come.'

He came towards her along the narrow passage, to the spot where she stood tremulous on the lowest step of the stairs. A lamp burning on a table revealed her slight figure in black, the warm white of her throat and face, the grace of the bending head, and the brown hair wreathed about it. He saw her as an exquisite vision in a dim light and shade. But it was not that which broke down his self-control so much as the pathetic look in her dark eyes, the look of one who is glad, and yet shrinks from her own gladness—tragically conscious of her own weakness, and yet happy in it. It touched his heart so pro-

foundly that whether the effect was pain or pleasure he could not have told. But as he reached the step, moved by an irresistible impulse, he held out his arms, and she melted into them. For one entrancing instant, he held her close and warm upon his breast, while the world went by.

But the next moment she had slipped away, and was sitting on the step, her face in her hands.

He did not plead or excuse himself. He just stood by her endeavouring to still and control his pulses—till at last she looked up. The lamp shewed her his face, and the passion in it terrified her. For there had been no passion in her soft and sudden yielding. Only the instinct of the child that is forsaken and wants comforting, that feels love close to it, and cannot refuse it.

'There, you see!' she said, desperately—'You see—I must go!'

'No! It's I who must go. Unless'—his voice sank almost to a whisper—'Nelly!—couldn't you—marry me? You should never, never regret it.'

She shook her head, and as she dropped her face again in her hands he saw a shudder run through her. At the sight his natural impulse was to let passion have its way, to raise her in his arms again, and whisper to her there in the dark, as love inspired him, his cheek on hers. But he did not venture. He was well aware of something intangible and incalculable in Nelly that could not be driven. His fear of it held him in check. He knew that she was

infinitely sorry for him and tender towards him. But he knew too that she was not in love with him. Only—he would take his chance of that, if only she would marry him.

'Dear!' he said, stooping to her, and touching her dark curls with his hand. 'Let's call in Hester! She's dreadfully wise! If you were with her I should feel happy—I could wait. But it is when I see you so lonely here—and so sad—nobody to care for you!—that I can't bear it!'

Through the rush of the wind, a sound of someone crossing the yard behind the farm came to their ears. Nelly sprang to her feet and led the way upstairs. Farrell followed her, and as they moved, they heard Bridget open the back door and come in.

The little sitting-room was bright with lamp and fire, and Farrell, perceiving that they were no longer to be alone, and momentarily expecting Bridget's entrance, put impatience aside and began to talk of his drive from Carton.

'The wind on Dunmail Raise was appalling, and the lamps got so be-snowed, we had to be constantly clearing them. But directly we got down into the valley it mended, and I managed to stop at the post-office, and ask if there were any letters for you. There were two—and a telegram. What have I done with them?' He began to search in his pockets, his wits meanwhile in such a whirl that it was difficult for him to realise what he was doing.

At that point Bridget opened the door. He turned to shake hands with her, and then resumed his fumbling.

'I'm sure they did give them to me'—he said, in some concern,—'two letters and a telegram.'

'A telegram!' said Bridget, suddenly, hurrying forward,—'it must be for me.'

She peremptorily held out her hand, and as she did so, Nelly caught sight of her sister. Startled out of all other thoughts she too made a step forward. What *was* wrong with Bridget? The tall, gaunt woman stood there livid, her eyes staring at Farrell, her hand unsteady as she thrust it towards him.

'Give me the telegram, please! I was expecting one,' she said, trying to speak as usual.

Farrell turned to her in surprise.

'But it wasn't for you, Miss Cookson. It was for Mrs. Sarratt. I saw the address quite plainly. Ah, here they are. How stupid of me! What on earth made me put them in that pocket.'

He drew out the letters and the telegram. Bridget said again—'Give it me, please! I know it's for me!' And she tried to snatch it. Farrell's face changed. He disliked Bridget Cookson heartily, mainly on Nelly's account, and her rude persistence nettled a temper accustomed to command. He quietly put her aside.

'When your sister has read it, Miss Cookson, she will no doubt let you see it. As it happens, the post-

mistress made me promise to give it to Mrs. Sarratt myself. She seemed interested—I don't know why.'

Nelly took it. Farrell—who began to have some strange misgiving—stood between her and Bridget. Bridget made no further movement. Her eyes were fixed on Nelly.

Nelly, bewildered by the little scene and by Bridget's extraordinary behaviour, tore open the brown envelope, and read slowly—

'Please come at once. Have some news for you. Your sister will explain. Howson, Base Headquarters, X——, France.'

'Howson?' said Nelly. Then the colour began to ebb from her face. '*Dr.* Howson?' she repeated. 'What news? What does he mean? *Oh!*'—the cry rang through the room—'*it's George!*—it's George! he's found!—he's found!'

She thrust the telegram piteously into Farrell's hands. He read it, and turned to Bridget.

'What does Dr. Howson mean, Miss Cookson, and why does he refer Mrs. Sarratt to you?'

For some seconds she could not make her pale lips reply. Finally, she said—

'That's entirely my own affair, Sir William. I shall tell my sister, of course. But Nelly had better go at once, as Dr. Howson advises. I'll go and see to things.'

She turned slowly away. Nelly ran forward and caught her.

'Oh, Bridget—don't go—you mustn't go! What

news is it? Bridget, tell me!—you couldn't—you *couldn't* be so cruel—not to tell me—if you knew anything about George!'

Bridget stood silent.

'Oh, what can I do—what can I do?' cried Nelly.

Then her eyes fell on the letters still in her hand. She tore one open—and read it—with mingled cries of anguish and joy. Farrell dared not go near her. There seemed already a gulf between her and him.

'It's from Miss Eustace'—she said, panting, as she looked up at last, and handed the letter to him—'it's George—he's alive—they've heard from France—he asks for me—but—but—he's dying.'

Her head dropped forward a little. She caught at the back of a chair, nearly fainting. But when Farrell approached her, she put up a hand in protest.

'No, no,—I'm all right. But, Bridget, Miss Eustace says—you've actually *seen* him—you've been to France. When did you go?'

'About three weeks ago,' said Bridget, after a moment's pause. 'Oh, of course I know'—she threw back her head defiantly—'you'll all set on me—you'll all blame me. But I suppose I may be mistaken like anybody else—mayn't I? I didn't think the man I saw was George—I didn't! And what was the good of disturbing your mind?'

But as she told the lie, she told it so lamely and unconvincingly that neither of the other two believed

it for a moment. Nelly stood up—tottering—but mistress of herself. She looked at Farrell.

'Sir William—can you take me to Windermere, for the night-train? I know when it goes—10.20. I'll be ready—by nine.' She glanced at the clock, which was just nearing seven.

'Of course,' said Farrell, taking up his hat. 'I'll go and see to the motor. But'—he looked at her with entreaty—'you can't go this long journey alone!'

The words implied a bitter consciousness that his own escort was impossible. Nelly did not notice it. She only said impatiently—

'But, of course, I must go alone.'

She stood silent—mastering the agony within—forcing herself to think and will. When the pause was over, she said quietly—'I will be quite ready at nine.' And then mechanically—'It's very good of you.'

He went away, passing Bridget, who stood with one foot on the fender, staring down into the fire.

When the outer door had closed upon him, Nelly looked at her sister. She was trembling all over.

'Bridget—*why* did you do it?' The voice was low and full of horror.

'What do you mean? I made a mistake—that's all!'

'Bridget—you *knew* it was George! You couldn't be mistaken. Miss Eustace says—in the letter'—she pointed to it—'they asked you about his hands.

Do you remember how you used to mock at them?'

'As if one could remember after a year and a half!'

'No, you couldn't forget, Bridget—a thing like that—I know you couldn't. And what made you do it! Did you think I had forgotten George?'

At that the tears streamed down her face, unheeded. She approached her sister piteously.

'Bridget, tell me what he looked like! Did you speak to him—did you see his eyes open? Oh my poor George!—and I here—never thinking of him'—she broke off incoherently, twisting her hands. 'Miss Eustace says he was wounded in two places—severely—that she's afraid there's no hope. Did they say that to you, Bridget—tell me!—for Heaven's sake tell me!'

'You'll make yourself ill,' said Bridget harshly. 'You'd better lie down, and let me pack for you.'

Nelly laughed out.

'As if I'd ever let you do anything for me any more! No, that's done with. You've been so accustomed to manage me all these years. You thought you could manage me now—you thought you could let George die—and I should never know—and you'd make me marry—William Farrell. Bridget—*I hate you!*'

She broke off, shivering, but resumed almost at once—'I see it all—I think I see it all. And now it's all done for between you and me. If George dies, I shall never come back to live with you again.

You'd better make plans, Bridget. It's over for ever.'

'You don't know what you're saying, now,' said Bridget, coldly.

Nelly did not hear her, she was lost in a whirl of images and thoughts. And governed by them she went up to Bridget again, thrusting her small white face under her sister's eyes.

'What sort of a room was he in, Bridget? Who was nursing him? Are you sure he didn't know you? Did you call him by his name? Did you make him understand?'

'He knew nobody,' said Bridget, drawing back, against her will, before the fire in Nelly's wild eyes. 'He was in a very good room. There was a nurse sitting with him.'

'Was he—was he very changed?'

'Of course he was. If not, I should have known him.'

Nelly half smiled. Bridget could never have thought that soft mouth capable of so much scorn. But no words came. Then Nelly walked away to a drawer where she kept her accounts, her cheque-book, and any loose money she might be in possession of. She took out her cheque-book and some two or three pounds that lay there.

'If you want money, I can lend you some,' said Bridget, catching at the old note of guardianship.

'Thank you. But I shall not want it.'

'Nelly, don't be a fool!' said Bridget, stung at

last into speech. 'Suppose all you think is true—I don't admit it, mind—but suppose it's true. How was I doing such a terrible wrong to you?—in the eyes, I mean, of sensible people—in not disturbing your mind. Nobody expected—that man I saw—to know anybody again—or to live more than a few days. Even if I had been certain—and how could I be certain?—wasn't it *reasonable* to weigh one thing against another? You know very well—it's childish to ignore it—what's been going on here——'

But she paused. Nelly, writing a letter, was not apparently concerned with anything Bridget had been saying. It did not seem to have reached her ears. A queer terror shot through Bridget. But she dismissed it. As if Nelly could ever really get on without her. Little, feckless, sentimental thing!

Nelly finished her letter and put it up.

'I have written to Sir William's agent, Bridget'—she said turning towards her sister—'to say that I give up the farm. I shall pay the servant. Hester will look after my things, and send them—when I want them.'

'Why Hester?' said Bridget, with something of a sneer.

Nelly did not answer. She put up her letter, took the money and the cheque-book and went out of the room. Bridget heard her call their one servant, Mrs. Dowson, and presently steps ascended the stairs and Nelly's door shut. The sound of the shutting door roused in her again that avenging terror. Her first

impulse was to go and force herself into Nelly's room, so as to manage and pack for her as usual. But something stopped her. She consoled herself by going down to the kitchen to look after the supper. Nelly, of course, must have some food before her night journey.

Behind that shut door, Nelly was looking into the kind weather-beaten face of Mrs. Dowson.

'Mrs. Dowson, I'm going away to-night—and I'm not coming back. Sir William knows.'

Then she caught the woman's gnarled hands, and her own features began to work.

'Mrs. Dowson, they've found my husband! Did Sir William tell you? He's not dead—he's alive—But he's very, very ill.'

'Oh, you poor lamb!' cried Mrs. Dowson. 'No—Sir William tellt me nowt. The Lord be gracious to you!' Bathed in sudden tears, she kissed one of the hands that held hers, pouring out incoherent words of hope. But Nelly did not cry, and presently she said firmly—

'Now, please, you must help me to pack. Sir William will be here at nine.'

Presently all was ready. Nelly had hunted out an old grey travelling dress in which George had often seen her, and a grey hat with a veil. She hastily put all her black clothes aside.

'Miss Martin will send me anything I want. I have asked her to come and fetch my things.'

'But Miss Cookson will be seein' to that!' said

Mrs. Dowson wondering. Nelly made no reply. She locked her little box, and then stood upright, looking round the small room. She seemed to be saying 'Good-bye' for ever to the Nelly who had lived, and dreamed, and prayed there. She was going to George—that was all she knew.

Downstairs, Bridget was standing at the door of the little dining-room. 'I have put out some cold meat for you,' she said, stiffly. 'You won't get anything for a long time.'

Nelly acquiesced. She drank some tea, and ate as much as she could. Neither she nor Bridget spoke, till Bridget, who was at the window looking out into the snow, turned round to say—'Here's the motor.'

Nelly rose, and tied her veil on closely. Mrs. Dowson brought her a thick coat, which had been part of her trousseau, and wrapped her in it.

'You had better take your grey shawl,' said Bridget.

'I have it here, Miss,' said Mrs. Dowson, producing it. 'I'll put it over her in the motor.'

She disappeared to open the door to Sir William's knock.

Nelly turned to her sister.

'Good-bye, Bridget.'

Bridget flamed out.

'And you don't mean to write to me? You mean to carry out this absurd plan of separation!'

'I don't know what I shall do—till I have seen

George,' said Nelly steadily. 'He'll settle for me. Only you and I are not sisters any more.'

Bridget shrugged her shoulders, with some angry remark about 'theatrical nonsense.' Nelly went out into the passage, threw her arms about Mrs. Dowson's neck, for a moment, and then hurried out towards the car. It stood there in the falling snow, its bright lights blazing on the bit of Westmorland wall opposite, and the overhanging oaks, still heavy with dead leaf. Farrell was standing at the door, holding a fur rug. He and Mrs. Dowson tucked it in round Nelly's small cloaked figure.

Then without a word, Farrell shut the door of the car, and took the seat beside the driver. In another minute Bridget was watching the lights of the lamps rushing along the sides of the lane, till at a sharp bend of the road it disappeared.

There was a break presently in the snow-fall, and as they reached the shores of Windermere, Nelly was aware of struggling gleams of moonlight on steely water. The anguish in her soul almost resented the break in the darkness. She was going to George; but George was dying, and while he had been lying there in his lonely suffering, she had been forgetting him, and betraying him. The recollection of Farrell's embrace overwhelmed her with a crushing sense of guilt. George indeed should never know. But that made no difference to her own misery.

The miles flew by. She began to think of her

journey, to realise her helplessness and inexperience in the practical things of life. She must get her passport, and some money. Who would advise her, and tell her how to get to France under war conditions? Would she be allowed to go by the short sea passage? For that she knew a special permit was necessary. Could she get it at once, or would she be kept waiting in town? The notion of having to wait one unnecessary hour tortured her. Then her thoughts fastened on Miss Eustace of the Enquiry Office, who had written her the letter which had arrived simultaneously with Dr. Howson's telegram. 'Let me know if I can be of any use to you, for your journey. If there is anything you want to know that we can help you in, you had better come straight to this office.'

Yes, that she would do. But the train arrived in London at 7 A.M. And she could not possibly see Miss Eustace before ten or eleven. She must just sit in the waiting-room till it was time. And she must get some money. She had her cheque-book and would ask Sir William to tell her how to get a cheque cashed in London. She was ashamed of her own ignorance in these small practical matters.

The motor stopped. Sir William jumped down, but before he came to open the door for her, she saw him turn round and wave his hand to two persons standing outside the station. They hurried towards the motor, and as Nelly stepped down from it, she felt herself grasped by eager hands.

'You poor darling! I thought we couldn't be in time. But we flew. Don't trouble about anything. We've done it all.'

Cicely!—and behind her Marsworth.

Nelly drew back.

'Dear Cicely!' she said faintly—'but I can manage—I can manage quite well.'

Resistance, however, was useless. Marsworth and Cicely, it seemed, were going to London with her—Cicely probably to France; and Marsworth had already telegraphed about her passport. She would have gladly gone by herself, but she finally surrendered—for George's sake, that she might get to him the quicker.

Then everything was done for her. Amid the bustle of the departing train, she was piteously aware of Farrell, and just before they started, she leant out to give him her hand.

'I will tell George all you have done for me,' she said, gulping down a sob.

He pressed her hand before releasing it, but said nothing. What was there to say? Meanwhile, Cicely, to ease the situation, was chattering hard, describing how Farrell had sent his chauffeur to Ambleside on a motor bicycle, immediately after leaving Nelly, and so had got a telephone message through to Cicely.

'We had the small car out and ready in ten minutes, and, by good luck, there was a motor-transport man on leave, who had come to see a brother in the

hospital. We laid hands on him, and he drove us here. But it's a mercy we're not sitting on the Raise! You remember that heap of stones on the top of the Raise, that thing they say is a barrow—the grave of some old British party before the Flood?—well, the motor gave out there! Herbert and the chauffeur sat under it in the snow and worked at it. I thought the river was coming over the road, and that the wind would blow us all away. But it'll be all right for your crossing to-morrow—the storm will have quite gone down. Herbert thinks you'll start about twelve o'clock,—and you'll be at the camp that same night. Oh, isn't it wonderful!—isn't it *ripping?'* cried Cicely under her breath, stooping down to kiss Nelly, while the two men talked at the carriage window.—'You're going to get him home! We'll have the best men in London to look after him. He'll pull through, you'll see—he'll pull through!'

Nelly sank into a seat and closed her eyes. Cicely's talk—why did she call Marsworth 'Herbert'?—was almost unbearable to her. *She* knew through every vein that she was going across the Channel—to see George die. If only she were in time!—if only she might hold him in her arms once more! Would the train never go?

Farrell, in spite of snow and storm, pushed his way back to Carton that night. In that long motor drive a man took counsel with himself on whom the

war had laid a chastening and refining hand. The human personality cannot spend itself on tasks of pity and service without taking the colour of them, without rising insensibly to the height of them. They may have been carelessly adopted, or imposed from without. But the mere doing of them exalts. As the dyer's hand is 'subdued to what it works in,' so the man that is always about some generous business for his fellow-men suffers thereby, insensibly, a change, which is part of the 'heavenly alchemy' for ever alive in the world. It was so at any rate with William Farrell. The two years of his hospital work —hard, honest grappling with the problems of human pain and its relief—had made a far nobler man of him. So now, in this solitary hour, he looked his trouble—courageously, chivalrously—in the face. The crash of all his immediate hopes was bitter indeed. What matter! Let him think only of those two poor things about to meet in France.

As to the future, he was well aware of the emotional depths in Nelly's nature. George Sarratt's claim upon her life and memory would now be doubly strong. For, with that long and intimate observation of the war which his hospital experience had brought him, Farrell was keenly aware of the merciful fact that the mere distance which, generally speaking, the war imposes between the man dying on the battle-field and those who love him at home, inevitably breaks the blow. The nerves of the woman who loses her husband or her son are, at

least, not tortured by the actual sight of his wounds and death. The suffering is spiritual, and the tender benumbing touch of religion or patriotism, or the remaining affections of life, has less to fight with than when the physical senses themselves are racked with acute memories of bodily wounds and bodily death. It is not that sorrow is less deep, or memory less tenacious; but both are less ruinous to the person sorrowing. So, at least, Farrell had often seen it, among even the most loving and passionate of women. Nelly's renascence in the quiet Westmorland life had been a fresh instance of it; and he had good reason for thinking that, but for the tragic reappearance of George Sarratt, it would not have taken very long,—a few months more, perhaps—before she would have been persuaded to let herself love, and be loved again.

But now, every fibre in her delicate being—physical and spiritual—would be racked by the sight of Sarratt's suffering and death. And no doubt—pure, scrupulous little soul!—she would be tormented by the thought of what had just passed between herself and him, before the news from France arrived. He might as well look that in the face.

Well!—patience and time—there was nothing else to look to. He braced himself to both, as he sped homeward through the high snowy roads, and dropped through sleeping Keswick to Bassenthwaite and Carton. Then with the sight of the hospital,

the Red Cross flag drooping above its doorway, as he drove up to it, the burden and interest of his great responsibilities returned upon him. He jumped out to say a few cheery words of thanks to his chauffeur, and went on with a rapid step to his office on the ground floor, where he found important letters and telegrams awaiting him. He dealt with them till far into the night. But the thought of Nelly never really left him; nor that haunting physical memory of her soft head upon his shoulder.

CHAPTER XVI

OF the weary hours which intervened between her meeting with Cicely and Marsworth at Windermere station and her sight of Dr. Howson on the rain-beaten quay at Bolougne, Nelly Sarratt could afterwards have given no clear account. Of all the strings that were pulled, and the exalted persons invoked, in order to place her as quickly as possible by the side of her dying husband, she knew practically nothing. Cicely and Marsworth, with Farrell to help them at the other end of a telegraph wire, did everything. Passports and special permits were available in a minimum of time. In the winter dawn at Euston Station, there was the grey-headed Miss Eustace waiting; and two famous Army doctors journeyed to Charing Cross a few hours later, on purpose to warn the wife of the condition in which she was likely to find her husband, and to give her kindly advice as to how she could help him most. The case had already made a sensation at the Army Medical Headquarters; the reports on it from France were being eagerly followed; and when the young wife appeared from the north, her pathetic beauty quickened the general sympathy. Nelly's path to France

was smoothed in every possible way. No Royalty could have been more anxiously thought for.

But she herself realised scarcely anything about it. It was her nature to be grateful, sweet, responsive; but her gratitude and her sweetness during these hours were automatic, unconscious. She was the spectator, so to speak, of a moving picture which carried her on with it, in which she was merely passive. The crowded boat, the grey misty sea, the destroyers to right and left, she was aware of them in one connection only—as part of the process by which she and George were to meet again.

But at last the boat was alongside the quays of the French port, and through sheets of rain she saw the lights of a climbing town, and the gleaming roadways of the docks. Crowds of men in khaki; a park of big guns, their wet nozzles glittering under the electric lamps overhead; hundreds of tethered horses; a long line of motor lorries;—the scene to her was all a vague confusion, as Cicely, efficient and masterful as usual, made a way for them both along the deck of the steamer through close ranks of soldiers—a draft waiting their orders to disembark. Then as they stepped on land, perception sharpened in a moment. A tall man in khaki—whom she recognised as Dr. Howson—came eagerly forward.

'Mrs. Sarratt!—I hope you're not too tired. Would you rather get some food here, in the town, or push on at once?'

'At once, please. How is he?'

A pair of kind grey eyes looked down upon her sadly.

'Very ill, *very* ill!—but quite sensible. I know you will be brave.'

He carried her along the quay—while Cicely was taken possession of by a nurse in uniform, who talked rapidly in an undertone.

'I have two cars,' said Howson to Nelly—'You and I will go first. Our head Sister, Miss Parrish, who has been in charge of the case for so long, will bring Miss Farrell.'

And as they reached the two waiting motors, Nelly found her hand grasped by a comely elderly woman, in a uniform of grey and red.

'He was quite comfortable when we left him, Mrs. Sarratt. There's a wonderful difference, even since yesterday, in his *mind*. He's beginning to remember everything. He knows you're coming. He said—"Give her my dear love, and tell her I'm not going to have my supper till she comes. She shall give it me." Think of that! It's like a miracle. Three weeks ago, he never spoke, he knew nobody.'

Nelly's white face trembled, but she said nothing. Howson put her into the foremost car, and they were soon off, threading their way through the busy streets of the base, while the Sister followed with Cicely.

'Oh, it was *cruel* not to let Mrs. Sarratt know

earlier!' said the Sister indignantly, in answer to a hurried question from Cicely as soon as they were alone. 'She might have had three weeks with him, and now there can only be a day or two. What was Miss Cookson about? Even if she were just mistaken, she might at least have brought her sister over to see for herself—instead of preventing it by every means in her power. A most extraordinary woman!'

Cicely felt her way in reply. She really knew nothing except what Farrell had been able hurriedly to say to Marsworth at Windermere station—which had been afterwards handed on to her. Farrell himself was entirely mystified. 'The only motive I can suggest'—he had said to Marsworth—'is that Miss Cookson had an insane dislike of her brother-in-law. But, even so, why did she do it?'

Why, indeed? Cicely now heard the whole story from her companion; and her shrewd mind very soon began to guess at reasons. She had always observed Bridget's complaisance towards her brother, and even towards herself—a clumsy complaisance which had never appealed at all either to her or him. And she had noticed many small traits and incidents that seemed to shew that Bridget had resented her sister's marriage, and felt bitterly that Nelly might have done far better for herself. Also that there was a strong taste for personal luxury in Bridget, which seemed entirely lacking in Nelly.

'She wanted Willy's money!'—thought Cicely—

' and couldn't get it for herself. So when poor Sarratt disappeared, she saw a way of getting it through Nelly. Not a bad idea!—if you are to have ideas of that kind. But then, why behave like an idiot when Providence had done the thing for you?'

That was really the puzzle. George Sarratt was dying. Why not let poor Nelly have her last weeks with him in peace, and then—in time—marry her safely and lawfully to Willy?

But Cicely had again some inkling of Bridget's probable reply. She had not been intimate with Nelly for more than a year without realising that she was one of those creatures—so rare in our modern world—who do in truth live and die by their affections. The disappearance of her husband had very nearly killed her. In the first winter after he was finally reported as ' Missing—believed killed,' and when she had really abandoned hope, the slightest accident—a bad chill—an attack of childish illness—any further shock—might have slit the thin-spun life in a few days or weeks. The Torquay doctor had told Hester that she was on the brink of tuberculosis, and if she were exposed to infection would certainly develop it. Since then she had gained greatly in vitality and strength. If only Fate had left her alone! ' With happiness and Willy, she'd have been all right! ' thought Cicely, who was daily accustomed to watch the effect of mind on body in her brother's hospital. But now, with this fresh

and deeper tragedy before her—tearing at the poor little heart—crushing the life again out of the frail being—why, the prospects of a happy ending were decidedly less. The odious Bridget might after all have acted intelligibly, though abominably.

As to the history of Sarratt's long disappearance, Cicely found that very little was known.

'We don't question him,' said the Sister. 'It only exhausts him; and it wouldn't be any good. He may tell his wife something more, of his own accord, but we doubt whether he knows much more than he told Dr. Howson. He remembers being wounded at Loos—lying out undiscovered, he thinks for two days—then a German hospital—and a long, long journey. And that's practically all. But just lately—this week, actually!—Dr. Howson has got some information, through a family of peasants living near Cassel, behind the British lines. They have relations across the Belgian border, and gradually they have discovered who the man was who came over the frontier with Mr. Sarratt. He came from a farm, somwhere between Brussels and Courtrai, and now they've managed to get a letter through from his brother. You know the man himself was shot just as they reached the British lines. But this letter really tells a good deal. The brother says that they found Mr. Sarratt almost dead,—and, as they thought, insane—in a wood near their house. He was then wearing the uniform of a British officer. They guessed he was an escaped prisoner, and they took

him in and hid him. Then news filtered through to them of two English officers who had made their escape from a hospital train somewhere south-west of Brussels; one slightly wounded, and one severely; the severely wounded man suffering also from shell-shock. And the slightly wounded man was shot, while the other escaped. The train, it was said, was lying in a siding at the time—at the further edge of the forest bordering their farm. So, of course, they identified the man discovered by them as the severely wounded officer. Mr. Sarratt must have somehow just struggled through to their side of the forest, where they found him.

'What happened then, we can't exactly trace. He must have been there all the winter. He was deaf and dumb, from nerve-shock, and could give no account of himself at all. The men of the farm, two unmarried sons, were good to him, but their old mother, whose family was German, always hated his being there. She was in terror of the German military police who used to ride over the farm, and one day, when her sons were away, she took Mr. Sarratt's uniform, his identification disk, and all the personal belongings she could find, and either burned or buried them. The sons, who were patriotic Belgians, were however determined to protect him, and no doubt there may have been some idea of a reward, if they could find his friends. But they were afraid of their tyrannical old mother, and of what she might do. So at last they made up their minds

to try somehow and get him over the French frontier, which was not far off, and through the German lines. One of the brothers, whose name was Benoit Desalles, to whom they say poor Mr. Sarratt was much attached, went with him. They must have had an awful time, walking by night, and hiding by day. Mr. Sarratt's wounds must have been in a bad state, for they were only half healed when he escaped, and they had been neglected all the winter. So how he dragged himself the distance he did, the doctors can't imagine. And the peasants near the frontier from whom we have got what information we have, have no knowledge at all of how he and his Belgian guide finally got through the German lines. But when they reached our lines, they were both, as Dr. Howson wrote to Miss Cookson, in German uniforms. His people suppose that Benoit had stripped some German dead, and that in the confusion caused in the German line—at a point where it ran through a Belgian village—by a British raid, at night, they got across the enemy trenches. And no doubt Benoit had local knowledge which helped.

'Then in the No Man's Land, between the lines, they were under both shell and rifle-fire, till it was seen by our men that Benoit had his hands up, and that the other was wounded. The poor Belgian was dragging Mr. Sarratt who was unconscious, and at last—wasn't it ill-luck?—just as our men were pulling them into the trench, Benoit was shot through the head by a German sniper. That, at least, is how we

now reconstruct the story. As far as Mr. Sarratt is concerned, we let it alone. We have no heart to worry him. Poor fellow—poor, gallant, patient fellow!'

And the Sister's strong face softened, as Bridget had seen it soften at Sarratt's bedside.

'And there is really no hope for him?' asked Cicely after a time. The Sister shook her head.

'The wounds have never healed—and they drain his life away. The heart can't last out much longer. But he's not in pain now—thank God! It's just weakness. I assure you, everybody—almost—in this huge camp, asks for him and many—pray for him.' The Sister's eyes filled with tears. 'And now that the poor wife's come in time, there'll be an excitement! I heard two men in one of our wards discussing it this morning. "They do say as Mrs. Sarratt will be here to-day," said one of them. "Well, that's a bit of all right, ain't it?" said the other, and they both smoked away, looking as pleased as Punch. You see Miss Cookson's behaviour has made the whole thing so extraordinary.'

Cicely agreed.

'I suppose she thought it would be all over in a day or two,' she said, half-absently.

The Sister looked puzzled.

'And that it would be better not to risk the effect on his wife? Of course Mrs. Sarratt does look dreadfully delicate. So you *don't* think it was a mistake? It's very difficult to see how it could be! The

hands alone—one would think that anybody who really knew him must have recognised them.'

Cicely said no more. But she wondered how poor Nelly and her sister would ever find it possible to meet again.

Meanwhile, in the car ahead, Howson was gently and tenderly preparing the mind of Nelly for her husband's state. He described to her also, the first signs of Sarratt's returning consciousness—the excitement among his doctors and nurses—the anxious waiting for the first words—the first clear evidence of restored hearing. And then, at last, the dazed question—'Where am I?'—and the perplexed effort to answer Howson's—'Can you tell us your name and regiment?'

Howson described the breathless waiting of himself and another doctor, and then the slow coming of the words: 'My name is George Sarratt, Lieutenant, 21st Lanchesters. But why——?'

A look of bewilderment at nurses and doctors, and then again—sleep.

'The next time he spoke, it was quite distinctly and of his own accord. The nurse heard him saying softly—it was in the early morning—"I want my wife—send for her." She told him you had been already sent for, and he turned his head round at once and went to sleep.'

Howson could hardly go on, so keenly did he realise the presence of the woman beside him. The soft fluttering breath unmanned him. But by de-

grees Nelly heard all there was to know; especially the details of the rapid revival of hearing, speech, and memory, which had gone on through the preceding three days.

'And what is such a blessing,' said Howson, with the cheerfulness of the good doctor—'is that he seems to be quite peaceful—quite at rest. He's not unhappy. He's just waiting for you. They'll have given him an injection of strychnine this evening to help him through.'

'How long?' The words were just breathed into the darkness.

'A day or two certainly—perhaps a week,' he said reluctantly. 'It's a question of strength. Sometimes it lasts much longer than we expect.'

He said nothing to her of her sister's visit. Instinctively he suspected some ugly meaning in that story. And Nelly asked no questions.

Suddenly, she was aware of lights in the darkness, and then of a great camp marked out in a pattern of electric lamps, stretching up and away over what seemed a wide and sloping hillside. Nelly put down the window to see.

'Is it here?'

'No. A little further on.'

It seemed to her interminably further. The car rattled over the rough pavement of a town, then through the darkness of woods—threading its way through a confusion of pale roads—until, with a violent bump, it came to a stop.

In the blackness of the November night, the chauffeur, mistaking the entrance to a house, had run up a back lane and into a sand-bank.

'Do you hear the sea?' said Howson, as he helped Nelly to alight. 'There'll be wind to-night. But here we are.'

She looked round her as they walked through a thin wood. To her right beyond the bare trees was a great building with a glass front. She could see lights within—the passing figures of nurses—rows of beds—and men in bed jackets—high rooms frescoed in bright colours.

'That used to be the Casino. Now it's a Red Cross Hospital. There are always doctors there. So when we moved him away from the camp, we took this little house close to the Hospital. The senior surgeon there can be often in and out. He's looking after him splendidly.'

A small room in a small house, built for summer lodgings by the sea; bare wooden walls and floor; a stove; open windows through which came the slow boom of waves breaking on a sandy shore; a bed, and in it an emaciated figure, propped up.

Nelly, as the door closed behind her, broke into a run like the soft flight of a bird, and fell on her knees beside the bed. She had taken off her hat and cloak. Excitement had kindled two spots of red in her pale cheeks. The man in the bed turned his eyes towards her, and smiled.

'Nelly!'

Howson and the Sister went on tiptoe through a side door into another room.

'Kiss me, Nelly!'

Nelly, trembling, put her soft lips to his. But as she did so, a chill anguish struck her—the first bitterness of the naked truth. As yet she had only seen it through a veil, darkly. Was this her George—this ghost, grey-haired, worn out, on the brink of the unknown? The old passionate pressure of the mouth gone—for ever! Her young husband—her young lover—she saw him far back in the past, on Rydal lake, the dripping oars in his hand. This was a spirit which touched her—a spiritual love which shone upon her. And she had never yet known so sharp an agony.

So sharp it was that it dried all tears. She knelt there with his hands in hers, kissing them, and gazing at him.

'Nelly, it's hard luck! Darling, I'd better have been patient. In time, perhaps, I should have come back to you. How I got away—who planned it—I don't remember. I remember nothing—of all that time. But Howson has heard something, through some people near Cassel—has he told you?'

'Yes—but don't try to remember.'

He smiled at her. How strange the old sweetness on these grey lips!

'Have you missed me—dreadfully? Poor little Nelly! You're very pale—a little shadow! Darling!—I *would* like to live!'

And at that—at last—the eyes of both, as they gazed at each other, filled with tears. Tears for the eternal helplessness of man,—the 'tears of things.'

But he roused himself, snatching still at a little love, a little brightness—before the dark. The strychnine injected had given him strength.

'Give me that jelly—and the champagne. Feed me, Nelly! But have you had any food?'

The stress laid on the '*you,*' the tone of his voice, were so like his old self that Nelly caught her breath. A ray of mad hope stole in. She began to feed him, and as she did so, the Sister, as though she had heard Sarratt's question, came quietly in with a tray on which was some food for Nelly, and put it down beside her. Then she disappeared again.

With difficulty, Sarratt swallowed a few mouthfuls of jelly and champagne. Then his left hand—the right was helpless—made a faint but peremptory sign, and Nelly obediently took some food under his dimly smiling eyes.

'I have though of this so often,' he murmured—'I knew you'd come. It's been like someone walking through a dark passage that was getting lighter. Only once—I had a curious dream. I thought I saw Bridget.'

Nelly, trembling, took away his tray and her own, and then knelt down again beside him. She kissed his forehead, and tried to divert his thoughts by ask-

ing him if he was warm enough. His hands were very cold. Should she make up the fire?

'Oh, no,—it's all right. But wasn't it strange? Suddenly, I seemed to be looking at her—quite close—and she at me. And I was worried because I had seen her more distinctly than I could remember you. Come nearer—put your dear head against me. Oh, if I could only hold you, as I used to!'

There was silence a little. But the wine had flushed him, and when the bloodless lids lifted again, there was more life in the eyes.

'Nelly, poor darling, have you been very lonely?—Were the Farrells kind to you?'

'Yes, George, very kind. They did everything—everything they could.'

'Sir William promised me'—he said, gratefully. 'And where have you been all the time? At Rydal?'

'No. I was ill—after the news came——'

'Poor Nelly!'

'And Sir William lent us one of his farms—near his cottage—do you remember?'

'A little. That was kind of him—very kind. Nelly—I want to send him a message——'

'Yes.'

'Give him my grateful thanks, darling,—and—and—my blessing.'

Nelly hid her face against him, and he felt the convulsion of tearless sobbing that passed through her.

'Poor Nelly!'—he said again, touching her hand

tenderly. Then after another pause—'Sit there, darling, where I can see you—your dear head, and your eyes, and your pretty neck. You must go to bed soon, you know—but just a little while! Now tell me what you have been doing. Talk to me. I won't talk. I'll rest—but I shall hear. That's so wonderful—that I *can* hear you. I've been living in such a queer world—no tongue—no ears—no mind, hardly—only my eyes.'

She obeyed him by a great effort. She talked to him—of what, she hardly knew!—about her months in London and Torquay—about her illness—the farm—Hester Martin—and Cicely.

When she came to speak of her friendship with Cicely, he smiled in surprise, his eyes still shut.

'That's jolly, dearest. You remember, I didn't like her. She wasn't at all nice to you—once. But thank her for me—please.'

'She's here now, George, she brought me here. She wouldn't let me come alone.'

'God bless her!' he said, under his breath. 'I'll see her—to-morrow. Now go on talking. You won't mind if I go to sleep? They won't let you stop here, dear. You'll be upstairs. But you'll come early—won't you?'

They gave him morphia, and he went to sleep under her eyes. Then the night nurse came in, and the surgeon from the hospital opposite, with Howson. And Cicely took Nelly away.

Cicely had made everything ready in the little

bare room upstairs. But when she had helped Nelly to undress, she did not linger.

'Knock on the wall, if you want me. It is only wood, I shall hear directly.'

Nelly kissed her and she went. For nothing in her tender service that day was Nelly more grateful to her.

Then Nelly put out her light, and drawing up the blind, she sat for long staring into the moonlight night. The rain had stopped, but the wind was high over the sea, which lay before her a tumbled mass of waves, not a hundred yards away. To her right was the Casino, a subdued light shining through the blinds of its glass verandahs, behind which she sometimes saw figures passing—nurses and doctors on their various errands. Were there men dying there to-night—like her George?

The anguish that held her, poor child, was no simple sorrow. Never—she knew it doubly now—had she ceased to love her husband. She had told Farrell the truth—'If George now were to come in at that door, there would be no other man in the world for me!' And yet, while George was dying, and at the very moment that he was asking for her, she had been in Farrell's arms, and yielding to his kisses. George would never know; but that only made her remorse the more torturing. She could never confess to him—that indeed was her misery. He would die, and her unfaith would stand between them for ever.

A cleverer, a more experienced, a more practical woman, in such a case, would have found a hundred excuses and justifications for herself that never occurred to Nelly Sarratt, to this young immature creature, in whom the passionate love of her marriage had roused feelings and emotions, which, when the man on whom they were spent was taken from her, were still the master-light of all her seeing—still so strong and absorbing, that, in her widowed state, they were like blind forces searching unconsciously for some new support, some new thing to love. She had nearly died for love—and then when her young strength revived it had become plain that she could only live for love. Her hands had met the hands seeking hers, inevitably, instinctively. To refuse, to stand aloof, to cause pain—that had been the torment, the impossibility, for one who had learnt so well how to give and to make happy. There was in it no sensual element—only Augustine's 'love of loving.' Yet her stricken conscience told her that, in her moral indecision, if the situation had lasted much longer, she had not been able to make up her mind to marry Farrell quickly, she might easily have become his mistress, through sheer weakness, sheer dread of his suffering, sheer longing to be loved.

Explanations and excuses, for any more seasoned student of human nature, emerged on every hand. Nelly in her despair allowed herself none of them. It merely seemed to her, in this night vigil, that she was unworthy to touch her George, to nurse him, to

uphold him; utterly unworthy of all this reverent pity and affection that was being lavished upon her for his sake.

She sat up most of the night, wrapped in her fur cloak, alive to any sound from the room below. And about four in the morning, she stole down the stairs to listen at his door. There one of the nurses found her, and moved with pity, brought her in. They settled her in an arm-chair near him; and then with the tardy coming of the November day, she watched the sad waking that was so many hours nearer death, at that moment when man's life is at its wretchedest, and all the forces of the underworld seem to be let loose upon it.

And there, for five days and nights, with the briefest possible intervals for food, and the sleep of exhaustion, she sat beside him. She was dimly conscious of the people about her, of the boundless tenderness and skill that was poured out upon the poor sufferer at her side; she did everything for George that the nurses could shew her how to do—it was the one grain of personal desire left in her, and doctors and nurses developed the most ingenious pity in devising things for her to do, and in letting every remedy that soothed his pain, or cleared his mind, go, as far as possible, through her hands. And there were moments when she would walk blindly along the sea beach with Cicely, finding a stimulus to endure in the sharpness of the winter wind, or looking in vague wonder at the great distant camp,

with its streets of hospitals, its long lines of huts, its training-grounds, and the bodies of men at work upon them. Here, the war came home to her, as a vast machine by which George, like millions of others, had been caught and crushed. She shuddered to think of it.

At intervals Sarratt still spoke a good deal, though rarely after their third day together. He asked her once—'Dear, did you ever send for my letter?' She paused a moment to think. 'You mean the letter you left for me—in case?' He made a sign of assent, and then smiled into the face bending over him. 'Read it again, darling. I mean it all now, as I did then.' She could only kiss him softly—without tears. After the first day she never cried.

On the last night of his life, when she thought that all speech was over, and that she would never hear his voice, or see a conscious look, again, he opened his eyes suddenly, and she heard—'I love you, sweetheart! I love you, sweetheart!' twice over. That was the last sound. Towards midnight he died.

Next morning Cicely wrote to Farrell:—

'We are coming home to-morrow after they bury him in the cemetery here. Please get Hester—*whatever she may be doing*—to throw it up, and come and meet us. She is the only person who can help Nelly now for a bit. Nelly pines for Rydal—where they were together. She would go to Hester's cottage. Tell Hester.

'Why, old boy, do such things happen? That's

what I keep asking—not being a saint, like these dear nurses here, who really have been angelic. I am the only one who rebels. George Sarratt was so patient—so terribly patient! And Nelly is just crushed—for the moment, though I sometimes expect to see a strange energy in her before long. But I keep knocking my head all day, and part of the night—the very small part that I'm not asleep—against the questions that everybody seems to have asked since the world began—and I know that I am a fool, and go on doing it.

'George Sarratt, I think, was a simple Christian, and died like one. He seemed to like the Chaplain, which was a comfort. How much any of that means to Nelly I don't know.'

She also wrote to Marsworth:—

'Meet us, please, at Charing Cross. I have no spirit to answer your last letters as they deserve. But I give you notice that I don't thrive on too sweet a diet—and praise is positively bad for me. It wrinkles me up the wrong way.

'What can be done about that incredible sister? She ought to know that Nelly is determined not to see her. Just think!—they might have had nearly a month together, and she cut it down to five days!

('Dear Herbert, say anything you like, and the sweeter the better!)

'Yours,

'CICELY.'

CHAPTER XVII

'WELL—what news?' said Farrell abruptly. For Cicely had come into his library with a letter in her hand. The library was a fine eighteenth-century room still preserved intact amid the general appropriation of the big house by the hospital, and when he was not busy in his office, it was his place of refuge.

Cicely perched herself on the edge of his writing-table.

'Hester has brought her to Rydal all right,' she said cheerfully.

'How is she?'

'As you might expect. But Hester says she talks of nothing but going to work. She has absolutely set her heart upon it, and there is no moving her.'

'It is, of course, an absurdity,' said Farrell, frowning.

'Absurdity or not, she means to do it, and Hester begs that nobody will try to persuade her against it. She has promised Hester to stay with her for three weeks, and then she has already made her arrangements.'

'What is she going to do?'

'She is going to a hospital near Manchester. They want a V.A.D. housemaid.'

Farrell rose impatiently, and stretching out his hand for his pipe, began to pace the room, steeped evidently in disagreeable reflection.

'You know as well as I do'—he said at last—'that she hasn't the physical strength for it.'

'Well then she'll break down, and we can put her to bed. But try she will, and I entirely approve of it,' said Cicely firmly. 'Hard physical work—till you drop—till you're so tired, you *must* go to sleep—that's the only thing when you're as miserable as poor Nelly. You know it is, Will. Don't you remember that poor Mrs. Henessy whose son died here? Her letters to me afterwards used to be all about *scrubbing*. If she could scrub from morning till night, she could just get along. She scrubbed herself sane again. The bigger the floor, the better she liked it. When bedtime came, she just slept like a log. And at last she got all right. But it was touch-and-go when she left here.'

'She was a powerfully-built woman,' said Farrell gloomily.

'Oh, well, it isn't always the strapping ones that come through. Anyway, old boy, I'm afraid you can't do anything to alter it.'

She looked at him a little askance. It was perfectly understood between them that Cicely was more or less acquainted with her brother's plight, and since her engagement to Marsworth had been announced it was astonishing how much more ready Farrell had been to confide in her, and she to be confided in.

But for her few days in France, however, with Nelly Sarratt, Marsworth might still have had some wrestles to go through with Cicely. At the very moment when Farrell's telephone message arrived, imploring her to take charge of Nelly on her journey, Cicely was engaged in fresh quarrelling with her long-suffering lover. But the spectacle of Sarratt's death, and Nelly's agony, together with her own quick divination of Nelly's inner mind, had worked profoundly on Cicely, and Marsworth had never shewn himself a better fellow than in his complete sympathy with her, and his eager pity for the Sarratts. 'I haven't the heart to tease him'—Cicely had said candidly after her return to England. 'He's been so horribly nice to me!' And the Petruchio having once got the upper hand, the Katherine was—like her prototype—almost overdoing it. The corduroy trousers, Russian boots, the flame-coloured jersey actually arrived. Cicely looked at them wistfully and locked them up. As to the extravagances that still remained, in hats, or skirts, or head-dressing, were they to be any further reduced, Marsworth would probably himself implore her not to be too suddenly reasonable. For, without them, Cicely would be only half Cicely.

But his sister's engagement, perhaps, had only made Farrell feel more sharply than ever the collapse of his own hopes. Three days after Sarratt's death Nelly had written to him to give him George's dying message, and to thank him on her own account

for all that he had done to help her journey. The letter was phrased as Nelly could not help phrasing anything she wrote. Cicely, to whom Nelly dumbly shewed it, thought it 'sweet.' But on Farrell's morbid state, it struck like ice, and he had the greatest difficulty in writing a letter of sympathy, such as any common friend must send her, in return. Every word seemed to him either too strong or too weak. The poor Viking, indeed, had begun to look almost middle-aged, and Cicely with a pang had discovered or fancied some streaks of grey in the splendid red beard and curly hair. At the same time her half-sarcastic sense perceived that he was far better provided than Nelly, with the means of self-protection against his trouble. 'Men always are,' thought Cicely—'they have so much more interesting things to do.' And she compared the now famous hospital, with its constant scientific developments, the ever-changing and absorbing spectacle of the life within it, and Farrell's remarkable position amid its strenuous world—with poor Nelly's 'housemaiding.'

But Nelly was choosing the path that suited her own need, and in the spiritual world, the humblest means may be the best. It was when she was cooking for her nuns that some of St. Teresa's divinest ecstasies came upon her! Not that there was any prospect of ecstasy for Nelly Sarratt. She seemed to herself to be engaged in a kind of surgery—the cutting or burning away of elements in herself that she had come to scorn. Hester, who was some-

thing of a saint herself, came near to understanding her. Cicely could only wonder. But Hester perceived, with awe, a *fierceness* in Nelly—a kind of cruelty—towards herself, with which she knew well, from a long experience of human beings, that it was no use to argue. The little, loving, easy-going thing had discovered in her own gentleness and weakness, the source of something despicable—that is, of her own failure to love George as steadfastly and truly as he had loved her. The whole memory of her marriage was poisoned for her by this bitter sense that in little more than a year after she had lost him, while he was actually still alive, and when the law even, let alone the highest standards of love, had not released her, she had begun to yield to the wooing of another man. Perhaps only chance, under all the difficult circumstances of her intimacy with Farrell, had saved her from a shameful yielding—from dishonour, as well as a broken faith.

'What had brought it about?'—she asked herself. And she asked it with a desperate will, determined to probe her own sin to the utmost. 'Soft living!'—was her own reply—moral and physical indolence. The pleasure of being petted and spoiled, the readiness to let others work for her, and think for her, what people called her 'sweetness!' She turned upon it with a burning hatred and contempt. She would scourge it out of herself. And then perhaps some day she would be able to think of George's last faint words with something else than remorseful

anguish—*'I love you, sweetheart!—I love you, sweetheart!'*

During the three weeks, however, that she was with Hester, she was very silent. She clung to Hester without words, and with much less than her usual caressingness. She found—it was evident—a certain comfort in solitary walks, in the simple talk of Mrs. Tyson, and 'Father Time,' who came to see her, and scolded her for her pale cheeks with a disrespectful vigour which brought actually a smile to her eyes. Tommy was brought over to see her; and she sat beside him, while he lay on the floor drawing Hoons and Haggans, at a great rate, and brimful of fresh adventures in 'Jupe.' But he was soon conscious that his old playfellow was not the listener she had been; and he presently stole away with a wistful look at her.

One evening early in December, Hester coming in from marketing in Ambleside, found Nelly, sitting by the fire, a book open on her knee, so absorbed in thought that she had not heard her friend's entrance. Yet her lips seemed to be moving. Hester came softly, and knelt down beside her.

'Darling, I have been such a long time away!'

Nelly drew a deep breath.

'Oh, no!—I—I've been thinking.'

Hester looked at the open book, and saw that it was 'The Letters of St. Ignatius'—a cheap copy, belonging to a popular theological 'Library,' she herself had lately bought.

'Did that interest you, Nelly?' she asked, wondering.

'Some of it'—said Nelly, flushing a little. And after a moment's hesitation, she pointed to a passage under her hand:—

'For I fear your love, lest it injure me, for it is easy to do what you will; but it is difficult for me to attain unto God, if ye insist on sparing me.'

And suddenly Hester remembered that before going out she had entreated Nelly to give herself another fortnight's rest before going to Manchester. It would then be only six weeks since her husband's death. 'And if you break down, dear,'—she had ventured—'it won't only be trouble to you—but to them'—meaning the hospital authorities. Whereupon for the first time since her return, Nelly's eyes had filled with tears. But she made no reply, and Hester had gone away uneasy.

'Why will you be so hard on yourself?' she murmured, taking the lovely childish face in her two hands and kissing it.

Nelly gently released herself, and pointed again, mutely, to a passage further on—the famous passage in which the saint, already in the ecstasy of martyrdom, appeals again to the Christian church in Rome, whether he is bound, not to save him from the wild beasts of the arena. 'I entreat you, shew not unto me an unseasonable love! Suffer me to be the food of wild beasts, through whom it is allowed me to attain unto God. I am the corn of God; let me be

ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ. . . . Pardon me in this. I know what is expedient for me. I am but now beginning to be a disciple.'

'Nelly dear—what do you mean?'

A faint little smile crossed Nelly's face.

'Oh, nothing—only—' she sighed again—'It's so *splendid!* Such a will!—such a faith! No one thinks like that now. No one is willing to be "the corn of God."'

'Oh, yes they are!' said Hester, passionately. 'There are thousands of men—and women—in this war, who are willing to do everything—suffer everything—for others—their country—their people at home.'

'Well, then they're happy!—and why hold anyone back?' said Nelly, with soft reproach. And letting her head drop on Hester's shoulder, she said, slowly—

'Let me go, dear Hester—let me go! It's drudgery I want—*drudgery,*' she repeated with intensity. 'Something that I don't want to do—something that's against the grain—all day long.' Then she laughed and roused herself. 'Not much likeness between me and St. Ignatius, is there?'

Hester considered her gravely.

'When people like you are wrestling all day and every day with something too hard for them, their strength gives way. They think they can do it, but they can't.'

'My strength won't give way,' said Nelly, with quiet conviction. Then, after pausing a moment, she said with a strange ardour—'I once heard a story—a true story—of a man, who burnt his own hand off, because it had struck his friend. He held it in a flame till there was only the burnt stump, and after that he forgave himself and could bear to live again.'

'But whom have you struck, you poor child!' cried Hester.

'*George!*' said Nelly, looking at her with bitterly shining eyes.

Hester's arms enfolded her, and they talked far into the night. Before they separated, Hester had agreed that the date of Nelly's departure should be not postponed, but quickened.

And during the few remaining days they were together, Hester could only notice with growing amazement the change in all the small ways and habits that had once characterised Nelly Sarratt—especially since her Torquay illness; the small invalidisms and self-indulgences, the dependence on a servant or on Bridget. Now the ascetic, penitential passion had come upon her; as it comes in different forms, upon many a man or woman in the *sélva oscúra* of their life; and Hester knew that there was no resisting it.

Hester went back to her 'Welfare' work. Cicely travelled between Carton and London, collecting her trousseau and declaring that she *would* be married in Lent, whatever people might say. Farrell was deeply

engaged in introducing a new antiseptic treatment of an extremely costly kind throughout his hospital, in watching the results of it, and in giving facilities for the study of it, to the authorities and officials of all kinds who applied to him. A sorrowful man—but a very busy one. Marsworth was making his mark in the Intelligence Department of the War Office, and was being freely named as the head of an important Military Mission to one of the Allied Headquarters. What would become of Cicely and the wedding, if the post were given him, and—as was probable—at a day's warning—was not quite clear. Cicely, however, took it calmly. 'They can't give us less than three hours' notice—and if it's after two o'clock, we can always get married somehow by five. You scurry round, pay fifty pounds, and somebody at Lambeth does it. Then—I should see him safely off in the evening!'

Meanwhile Bridget Cookson was living in her usual Bloomsbury boarding-house, holding herself quite aloof from the idle ways of its inmates, who, in the midst of the world-war, were still shopping as usual in the mornings and spending the afternoons in tea and gossip. Bridget, however, was scarcely employing her own time to any greater profit for a burdened country. She was learning various languages, and attending a number of miscellaneous lectures. Her time was fairly full, and she lived in an illusion of multifarious knowledge which flattered her vanity. She was certainly far cleverer

and better-educated than the other women of her boarding-house; and she was one of those persons who throughout life prefer to live with their inferiors. 'The only remedy against a superiority,'—says some French writer—'is to love it.' But Bridget was so made that she could not love it; she could only pull it down and belittle it.

But all the same, Bridget Cookson was no monster, though she was probably without feelings and instincts that most people possess. She missed Nelly a good deal, more than Nelly herself would have believed. And she thought now, that she had behaved like a fool in not recognising Sarratt at once, and so preserving her influence with her sister. Morally, however, she saw no great harm in what she had done. It was arguable, at any rate. Everything was arguable. As to the effect on Nelly of the outward and visible facts of Sarratt's death, it seemed to have been exactly what she, Bridget, had foreseen. Through some Manchester acquaintance she succeeded in getting occasional news of Nelly, who was, it appeared, killing herself with hard and disagreeable work. She heard also from the woman left in charge of the Loughrigg farm that all Mrs. Sarratt's personal possessions had been sent to the care of Miss Martin, and that Sir William had shut up the cottage and never came there. Sometimes Bridget would grimly contrast this state of things with what might have happened, had her stroke succeeded, and had George died unrecognised. In that

event how many people would have been made happy, who were now made miserable!

The winter passed away, the long and bitter winter which seemed to sharpen for English hearts and nerves all the suffering of the war. On the Somme the Germans were secretly preparing the retreat which began with the spring, while the British armies were growing to their full stature, month by month, and England was becoming slowly accustomed to the new and amazing consciousness of herself as a great military power. And meanwhile death in the trenches still took its steady toll of our best and dearest; and at sea, while British sea-power pressed home its stifling grasp on the life of Germany, the submarine made England anxious, but not afraid.

March shewed some pale gleams of spring, but April was one of the coldest and dreariest in the memory of living man. The old earth in sympathy with the great struggle that was devastating and searing her, seemed to be withholding leaf and flower, and forbidding the sun to woo her.

Till the very first days of May! Then, with a great return upon herself, Nature flew to work. The trees rushed into leaf, and never had there been such a glorious leafage. Everything was late, but everything was perfection. And nowhere was the spring loveliness more lovely than in Westmorland. The gentle valleys of the Lakes had been muffled in snow and scourged with hail. The winter furies had made their lairs in the higher fells, and rushed shrieking

week after week through delicate and quiet scenes not made for them. The six months from November to May had been for the dale-dwellers one long endurance. But in one May week all was forgotten and atoned for. Beauty, 'an hourly presence,' reigned without a rival. From the purple heights that stand about Langdale and Derwentwater, to the little ferns and mountain plants that crept on every wall, or dipped in every brook, the mountain land was all alive and joyful. The streams alone made a chorus for the gods.

Hester, who was now a woman of sixty, had reluctantly admitted, by the middle of the month, that, after a long winter spent in a munition factory and a Lancashire town, employed on the most strenuous work that she, an honest worker all her life, had ever known, a fortnight's holiday was reasonable. And she wrote to Nelly Sarratt, just as she was departing northwards, to say—cunningly—that she was very tired and run down, and would Nelly come and look after her for a little? It was the first kindness she had ever asked of Nelly, to whom she had done so many. Nelly telegraphed in reply that in two days she would be at Rydal.

Hester spent the two days in an expectation half-eager, half-anxious. It had been agreed between them that in their correspondence the subject of Nelly's health was to be tabooed. In case of a serious breakdown, the Commandant of Nelly's hospital would write. Otherwise there were to be no

enquiries and no sympathy. Cicely Marsworth before her marriage in early March had seen Nelly twice and had reported—against the grain—that although 'most unbecomingly thin,' the obstinate little creature said she was well, and apparently was well. Everybody in the hospital, said Cicely, was at Nelly's feet. 'It is of course nonsense for her to lay down that she won't be petted, Nature has settled that for her. However, I am bound to say it is the one thing that makes her angry, and the nurses are all amazed at what she has been able to stand. There is a half-blind boy, suffering from "shock" in one of the wards, to whom they say she has devoted herself for months. She has taught him to speak again, and to walk, and the nerve-specialist who has been looking after the poor fellow told her he would trust her with his worst cases, if only she would come and nurse for him. That did seem to please her. She flushed up a little when she told me. Otherwise she has become *horribly impersonal!* Her wings are growing rapidly. But oh, Hester, I did and do prefer the old Nelly to any angel I've ever known. If I hadn't married Herbert, I should like to spend all my time in *tempting her*—the poor darling!—as the devil—who was such a fool!—tempted St. Anthony. I know plenty of saints; but I know only one little, soft kissable Nelly. She shan't be taken from us!'

So horribly impersonal! What did Cicely mean? Well, Cicely—with the object described in full view—would soon be able to tell her. For the Mars-

worths were coming to Carton for a week, before starting for Rome, and would certainly come over to her to say good-bye. As to William—would it really be necessary to leave him behind? Nelly must before long brace herself to see him again, as an ordinary friend. He had meant no harm—and done no harm—poor William! Hester was beginning secretly to be his warm partisan.

Twenty-four hours later, Nelly arrived. As Hester received her from the coach, and walked with her arm round the tiny waist to the cottage by the bend of the river, where tea beside the sun-flecked stream was set for the traveller, the older friend was at once startled and reassured. Reassured—because, after these six months, Nelly could laugh once more, and her step was once more firm and normal; and startled, by the new and lonely independence she perceived in her frail visitor. Nelly was in black again, with a small black hat from which her widow's veil fell back over her shoulders. The veil, the lawn collar and cuffs, together with her childish slightness, and the curls on her temples and brow that she had tried in vain to straighten, made her look like a little girl masquerading. And yet, in truth, what struck her hostess was the sad maturity for which she seemed to have exchanged her old clinging ways. She spoke, for the first time, as one who was mistress of her own life and its issues; with a perfectly clear notion of what there was for her to do. She had made up her mind, she told Hester, to take work

offered her in one of the new special hospitals for nervous cases which were the product of the war. 'They think I have a turn for it, and they are going to train me. Isn't it kind and dear of them?'

'But I am told it is the most exhausting form of nursing there is,' said Hester wondering. 'Are you quite sure you can stand it?'

'Try me!' said Nelly, with a strange brightness of look. Then reaching out a hand she slipped it contentedly into her friend's. 'Hester!—isn't it strange what we imagine about ourselves—and what is really true? I thought the first weeks that I was in hospital, I *must* break down. I never dreamt that anyone could feel so tired—so deadly ill—and yet go on. And then one began, little by little, to get hardened,—of course I'm only now beginning to feel that!—and it seems like being born again, with a quite new body, that one can make—yes, *make*—do as one likes. That's what the soldiers tell me—about *their* training. And they wonder at it, as I do.'

'My dear, you're horribly thin,' interrupted Hester.

'Oh, not too thin!' said Nelly, complacently.

Then she lifted up her eyes suddenly, and saw the lake in a dazzle of light, and Silver How, all purple, as of old; yet another family of wild duck swimming where the river issued from the lake; and just beyond, the white corner of the house where she and George had spent their few days of bliss. Slowly, the eyes filled with brimming tears. She threw off

her hat and veil, and slipping to the grass, she laid her head against her friend's knee, and there was a long silence.

Hester broke it at last.

'I want you to come a little way up the fell, and look at a daffodil field. We'll leave a message, and Cicely can follow us there.' And then she added, not without trepidation—'and I asked her to bring William, if he had time.'

Nelly was silent a moment, and then said quietly—'Thank you. I'm glad you did.'

They left the garden and wandered through some rocky fields on the side of the fell, till they came to one where Linnæus or any other pious soul might well have gone upon his knees for joy. Some loving hand had planted it with daffodils—the wild Lent lily of the district, though not now very plentiful about the actual lakes. And the daffodils had come back rejoicing to their kingdom, and made it their own again. They ran in lines and floods, in troops and skirmishers, all through the silky grass, and round the trunks of the old knotted oaks, that hung as though by one foot from the emerging rocks and screes. Above, the bloom of the wild cherries made a wavering screen of silver between the daffodils and the May sky; amid the blossom the golden-green of the oaks struck a strong riotous note; and far below, at their feet, the lake lay blue, with all the sky within it, and the softness of the larch-woods on its banks.

Nelly dropped into the grass among the daffodils. One could not have called her the spirit of the spring —the gleeful, earthly spring—as it would have been natural to do, in her honeymoon days. And yet, as Hester watched her, she seemed in her pale, changed beauty to be in some strange harmony with that grave, renewing, fruitful heart of all things, whereof the daffodils and the cherry-blossom were but symbols.

Presently there were voices beneath them—climbing voices that came nearer—of a man and a woman. Nelly's hand begun to pluck restlessly at the grass beside her.

Cicely emerged first, Cicely in white, very bridal, and very happy. Very conscious too, though she did not betray it by a movement or a look, of the significance of this first meeting, since Sarratt's death, between her brother and Nelly. But they met very simply. Nelly went a little way down the steep to meet them. She kissed Cicely, and gave Farrell her hand.

'It was very good of you to come.'

But then it seemed to Hester, who could not help watching it, that Nelly's face, as she stood there looking gravely at Farrell, shewed a sudden trouble and agitation. It was gone very quickly, however, and she and he walked on together along a green path skirting the fells, and winding through the daffodils and the hawthorns.

Cicely and Hester followed, soon perceiving that

the two ahead had slipped into animated conversation.

'What can it be about?' said Cicely, in Hester's ear.

'I heard the word "Charcot,"' said Hester.

The bride listened deliberately.

'And William's talking about an article in the *Lancet* he's been boring Herbert and me with, by that very specialist that Nelly's so keen about,—the man that is going to have her trained to nurse his cases. Something about the new treatment of "shock." I say, Hester, what an odd sort of fresh beginning!'

Cicely turned a look half grave, half laughing on her companion—adding hastily—

'The specialist's married!'

Hester frowned a little.

'Beginning of what?'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Cicely, with a shrug, 'But life is long, Mademoiselle Hester, and now they've got a common interest—outside themselves. They can talk about *things*—not feelings. Goodness!—did you hear that? William is head over ears in his new antiseptic—and look at Nelly—she's quite pink! That's what I meant by her being *horribly impersonal.* She used the word "scientific" to me, three times, when I went to see her—*Nelly!*'

'If she's impersonal, I should doubt whether William is,' said Hester drily.

'Ah, no—poor Willy!' was Cicely's musing reply.

'It's a hard time for him. I don't believe she's ever out of his mind. Or at least, she wouldn't be, if it weren't for his work. That's the blessed part—for both of them. And now you see—it gives them such a deal to talk about'—her gesture indicated the couple in front. 'It's like two sore surfaces, isn't it, that mustn't touch—you want something between.'

'All the same, William mustn't set his heart——'

'And Hester—dear old thing!—mustn't preach!' said Cicely laughing, and pinching her cousin's arm. 'What's the good of saying that, about a man like William, who knows what he wants? Of course he's set his heart, and will go on setting it. But he'll *wait*—as long as she likes.'

'It'll be a long time.'

'All right! They're neither of them Methuselahs yet. Heavens!—What are they at now? *Ambrine!—she's* talking to *him.*'

But some deep mingled instinct, at once of sympathy with Nelly and pity for Farrell, made Hester unwilling to discuss the subject any more. George's death was too recent; peace and a happy future too remote. So she turned on Cicely.

'And please, what have you done with Herbert? I was promised a bridegroom.'

'Business!' said Cicely, sighing. 'We had hardly arrived for our week's leave, when the wretched War Office wired him to come back. He went this morning, and I wanted to go too, but—I'm not to racket just now.'

Cicely blushed, and Hester, smiling, pressed her hand.

'Then you're not going to Rome?'

'Certainly I am! But one has to give occasional sops to the domestic tyrant.'

They sauntered back to tea in Hester's garden by the river, and there the talk of her three guests was more equal and unfettered, more of a real interchange, than Hester ever remembered it. Of old, Farrell had been the guardian and teacher, indoctrinating Nelly with his own views on art, reading to her from his favourite poets, or surrounding her in a hundred small matters with a playful and devoted homage. But now in the long wrestle with her grief and remorse, she had thought, as well as felt. She was as humble and simple as ever, but her companions realised that she was standing on her own feet. And this something new in her—which was nothing but a strengthened play of intelligence and will—had a curious effect on Farrell. It seemed to bring him out, also; so that the nobler aspects of his life, and the nobler proportions of his character shewed themselves, unconsciously. Hester, with anxious joy, guessed at the beginnings of a new moral relation, a true comradeship, between himself and Nelly, such as there had never yet been—which might go far. It masked the depths in both of them; or rather it was a first bridge thrown over the chasm between them. What would come of it?

Again she rebuked herself even for the question.

But when the time for departure came, and Nelly took Cicely into the house to fetch the wraps which had been left there, Farrell drew his chair close to Hester's. She read agitation in his look.

'So she's actually going to take up this new nursing? She says she is to have six months' training.'

'Yes—don't grudge it her!'

Farrell was silent a moment, then broke out—

'Did you ever see anything so small and transparent as her hands are? I was watching them as she sat there.'

'But they're capable!' laughed Hester. 'You should hear what her matron says of her.'

Farrell sighed.

'How much weight has she lost?'

'Not more—as yet—than she can stand. There's an intense life in her—a spiritual life—that seems to keep her going.'

'Hester—dear Hester—watch over her!'

He put out a hand and grasped his cousin's.

'Yes, you may trust me.'

'Hester!—do you believe there'll ever be any hope for me?'

'It's unkind even to think of it yet,' she said gravely.

He drew himself up, recovering self-control.

'I know—I know. I hope I'm not quite a fool! And indeed it's better than I thought. She's not going to banish me altogether. When this new hos-

pital's open—in another month or so—and she's settled there—she asks me to call upon her. She wants me to go into this man's treatment.' There was a touch of comedy in the words; but the emotion in his face was painful to see.

'Good!' said Hester, smiling.

When the guests were gone, Nelly came slowly back to Hester from the garden gate. Her hands were loosely clasped before her, her eyes on the ground. When she reached Hester she looked up and Hester saw that her eyes were full of tears.

'He'll miss her very much,' she said, sadly.

'Cicely?'

'Yes—she's been a great deal more to him lately than she used to be.'

Nelly stood silently looking out over the lake for a while. In her mind and Hester's there were thoughts which neither could express. Suddenly, Nelly turned to Hester. Her voice sounded strained and quick. 'I never told you—on my way here, I went to see Bridget.'

Hester was taken by surprise. After a moment's silence she said—

'Has she ever repented—ever asked your forgiveness?'

Nelly shook her head.

'But I think—she would be sorry—if she could. I shall go and see her sometimes. But she doesn't want me. She seems quite busy—and satisfied.'

'Satisfied!' said Hester, indignantly.

'I mean with what she is doing—with her way of living.'

There was silence. But presently there was a stifled sob in the darkness; and Hester knew that Nelly was thinking of those irrecoverable weeks of which Bridget's cruelty had robbed her.

Then presently bedtime came, and Hester saw her guest to her room. But a little while after, as she was standing by her own window she heard the garden door open and perceived a small figure slipping down over the lawn—a shadow among shadows—towards the path along the lake. And she guessed of course that Nelly had gone out to take a last look at the scene of her lost happiness, before her departure on the morrow.

Only twenty-two—with all her life before her—if she lived!

Of course, the probability was that she would live—and gradually forget—and in process of time marry William Farrell. But Hester could not be at all sure that the story would so work out. Supposing that the passion of philanthropy, or the passion of religion, fastened upon her—on the girlish nature that had proved itself with time to be of so much finer and rarer temper than those about her had ever suspected? Both passions are absorbing; both tend to blunt in many women the natural instinct of the woman towards the man. Nelly had been an old-fashioned, simple girl, brought up in a

backwater of life. Now she was being drawn into that world of the new woman—where are women policemen, and women chauffeurs, and militant suffragists, and women in overalls and breeches, and many other strange types. The war has shown us—suddenly and marvellously—the adaptability of women. Would little Nelly, too, prove as plastic as the rest, and in the excitement of meeting new demands, and reaching out to new powers, forget the old needs and sweetnesses?

It might be so; but in her heart of hearts, Hester did not believe it would be so.

Meanwhile Nelly was wandering through the May dusk along the lake. She walked through flowers. The scents of a rich earth were in the air; daylight lingered, but a full and golden moon hung over Loughrigg in the west; and the tranced water of the lake was marvellously giving back the beauty amid which it lay—form, and colour, and distance—and all the magic of the hour between day and night. There was no boat, alack, to take her to the island; but there it lay, dreaming on the silver water, with a great hawthorn in full flower shewing white upon its rocky side. She made her way to the point nearest to the island, and there sat down on a stone at the water's edge.

Opposite to her was the spot where she and George had drifted with the water on their last night together. If she shut her eyes she could see his sunburnt face, blanched by the moonlight, his strong

shoulders, his hands—which she had kissed—lying on the oars. And mingling with the vision was that other—of a grey, dying face, a torn and broken body.

Her heart was full of intensest love and yearning; but the love was no longer a torment. She knew now that if she had been able to tell George everything, he would never have condemned her; he would only have opened his arms and comforted her.

She was wrapped in a mystical sense of communion with him, as she sat dreaming there. But in such a calm and exaltation of spirit, that there was ample room besides in her mind for the thought of William Farrell—her friend. Her most faithful and chivalrous friend! She thought of Farrell's altered aspect, of the signs of a great task laid upon him, straining even his broad back. And then, of his loneliness. Cicely was gone—his 'little friend' was gone.

What could she still do for him? It seemed to her that even while George stood spiritually beside her, in this scene of their love, he was bidding her think kindly and gratefully of the man whom he had blessed in dying—the man who, in loving her, had meant him no harm.

Her mind formed no precise image of the future. She was incapable, indeed, as yet, of forming any that would have disturbed that intimate life with George which was the present fruit in her of remorseful love and pity. The spring shores of Rydal,

the meadows steeping their flowery grasses in the water, the new leaf, the up-curling fern, breathed in her unconscious ear their message of re-birth. But she knew only that she was uplifted, strengthened—to endure and serve.

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